

ようこそ
実力
至上主義へ
の教室へ



衣笠彰梧
KINUGASA SYOHGO
トモセシュンサク
TOMOSESHUNSAKU



Youkoso Jitsuryoku Shijou Shugi no Kyoushitsu e

Welcome to the Classroom of the Know-It-Alls

vol.1

by Kinugasa Syohgo

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ようこそ実力至上主義の教室へ 衣笠彰梧
トモセシュンサク

「先生。ひとつオレから質問させてもらつてもいいでしょか？」



「今の日本は、この社会は平等だと思いますか？」

「堀北に続いて、おまえまで
私に質問とはな。一体なんだ？」



堀北 鈴音

顔立ちだけを見れば大人びた美人だが、歯に衣を着せぬ発言と行動の結果、友達は無し。

綾小路 清隆

主人公。入試試験のテストや実技は平均点以下で凡人として扱われている。友達絶賛募集中。

櫛田桔梗

男女どちらに対しても気配りが出来る天使のような美少女。当然ながらクラスでも一番人気。

「綾小路くん。
苦しみながら後悔するのと、
絶望しながら後悔する、
あなたはどうちらが好みかしら？」

「……それで、オレは一体何をどうすればよろしいんでしょうかね？」

「私は 堀北さんの友達になりたいんだっ」



「もしもしーし」

ぶおー、という強い風の音と共に通話が繋がる。
それはすぐに音を弱め聞こえなくなる。

Prologue: The structure of Japanese society

It's a bit sudden, but listen seriously to the question I'm about to ask and think about the answer carefully.

Question: Are people equal or not?

These days, all society loves to talk about is equality. People are calling for men and women to be treated equally, and shouting for society to get rid of inequality. They call for high employment rates for women, personal-use cars for everyone, and they go as far as to find fault with the order of the register of names. People even advocate equality for people with disabilities, and now the public is encouraged to stop using the term "disabled people." Children are being taught that everyone is equal.

Is that really true?, I wondered.

Men and women have different roles if they have different abilities. People with disabilities are still disabled, no matter what term they call disabled people. None of this has meaning if no one pays attention to it.

In other words, the answer is no.

People are unequal beings; there are no truly "equal" people.

A great man once said that God did not make anyone above or below each other. But that doesn't mean that everyone is equal. Does you know that the passage doesn't end there? The rest is like this. Everyone is equal at birth, but then I asked, why are there differences in people's jobs and statuses?

That was written in the second half of the passage. Is it a difference because one struggled with academics or because one didn't try hard enough?

A difference is created there. That's the famous "scholarship studies." These teachings haven't changed at all, even in modern day 2015. However, the situation is more complex and is becoming more serious.

Anyhow, people are beings that are capable of thinking. I don't think it's correct to say that people should live on only using instincts because things

aren't fair.

In other words, the word equality is full of lies and falsehoods, but inequality is also unacceptable. I was trying to find a new answer to the eternal problem facing human beings.

Hey you, the one who's holding this book and reading it.

Have you ever thought about the future?

Have you ever imagined what it means to go to high school, to go to college?

Have you never felt that it was vague that one day, you would somehow find employment and get a job?

I felt that way.

When I finished compulsory education and entered high school, I didn't notice anything.

I only felt joy in being released of my "duty".

I didn't notice that, at that moment, my life and my future was being impacted progressively.

I didn't even understand what it meant to be studying Japanese and mathematics at school.

Chapter 1: Welcome to my dream-like school life

“Ayanokouji-kun, are you ok?”

It came. It came again. The feared situation.

As I was pretending to sleep, that person came.

It was the appearance of the devil, which forced me (who was taking a nap) to wake up to reality.

In my brain, Shostakovich’s 11th symphony was playing. The song perfectly described my current predicament: the feeling of utter hopelessness as people are chased by devils and as the end of the world quickly approached.

Even with my eyes closed, I could tell.

I could feel the alarming presence of the devil right next to me as it waited for its slave to wake up...

Now, as a slave, how do I escape this situation...?

To avoid danger, use the computer in the brain to instantly come up with the answer.

Conclusion... Pretend not to have heard anything. I am naming it the ‘pretend sleep’ strategy. My predicament will be solved with this strategy.

If the person talking was kind girl, she would overlook it after saying, ‘Well, it can’t be helped. I will forgive you because I’m sorry ☆’.

Even a pattern like ‘I will kiss if you don’t wake up, ok? Chuu~~’ is also OK.

“If you don’t wake up in 3 seconds, you’ll face punishments.”

“... The hell do you mean by ‘punishments’?”

In less than a second the ‘pretend sleep’ strategy was foiled and I succumbed to the threat.

Still, I refused to raise my head and continued to resist.

“Look, as I expected you were awake.”

“I already know of your scariness if I make you angry.”

“That’s good. Then, do you have some time?”

“... and if I say I don’t?”

“Well... I can’t force you, but I will be cranky if you don’t.”

She then continued.

“And if I’m cranky, I will be a major obstacle to Ayanokouji-kun’s normal school life. Hmm, for example, countless thumbtacks on your chair, spraying water on your head whenever you enter the bathroom, and sometimes stabbing you with a compass needle. That kind of behavior, yup.”

“That’s just plain harassment! Also, that last one seems strangely real, as if I remember already being stabbed!”

I reluctantly woke up and sat up in my seat.

A girl with long black hair and sharp, beautiful eyes looked down on me from the side.

Her name is Horikita Suzune. High school class 1-D, my classmate.

“Don’t be so scared. That was just a joke. I won’t pour water on you from above when you’re in the toilet.”

“The thumbtacks and the compass needle are more important! Look at this, this! You can still see where I was stabbed! How will you take responsibility if it becomes a lifetime scar?”

I roll up my sleeve of my right arm and show my upper arm to Horikita.

“Where’s the evidence?”

“Huh?”

“Where’s the evidence? Are you saying that I am the culprit without any proof?”

Of course, there is no evidence. Even though the only person who was close enough to stab me was Horikita, and even though she was holding a compass

needle in her hand, it's hard to say it definitively...

I had something important to confirm, though.

"Do I really have to help out? I thought about it again, but after all..."

"Hey Ayanokouji-kun. Regretting your decision while you're desperate, or while you're suffering... Which one do you like more? Because you pulled me from my responsibilities, you should be held accountable. Is that right?"

Horikita offered only two ridiculous, extreme options. Apparently, it seems that she will not allow a compromise. It was a mistake to make a contract with the devil. I decided to give up and obey.

"...So, what am I supposed to do?"

I asked while trembling in fear.

I won't be surprised when I hear what she's asking from me.

I don't know how things turned out like this, but I remember when all this started.

I met this girl exactly two months ago.

Was it on the day of the entrance ceremony...?

1

April.

The entrance ceremony.

I was going to school on the bus, which shook every time it passed over a bumpy area of the road.

As I watched the landscape change from area to area, the passengers on the bus increased gradually.

Most of the passengers were wearing school uniforms.

The lone frustrated salary worker who got on the bus remembered the time when he accidentally groped someone the last time he got on a crowded bus.

An old woman standing in front of me stood precariously on her unsteady

feet, looking as if she would fall over at any time.

I made a mistake by taking the bus.

Even though I was able to secure a good seat, the cold wind was blowing towards me and the whole bus was crowded.

That poor old woman will have to wait until the bus arrives at her destination.

The cloudless sky and clear weather is refreshing... I think I might fall asleep.

My tranquility and peace was suddenly interrupted.

"Don't you think you should give up your seat?"

For a moment, I opened my eyes that were about to close.

Eh, by any chance, were you scolding me?

That's what I thought at first, but apparently the person in front of me was being warned.

A young, well-built, blonde-haired man was sitting down in the priority seat. I mean high school student. The old woman was standing next to him. An office lady was next to the old woman.

"You there, can't you see the old woman having trouble?"

The office lady seemed to want him to hand over the priority seat to the old woman.

In the quiet bus, her voice got louder and attracted the attention of the other people in the bus.

"That's a really crazy question, lady."

The boy might have been angry, ignorant, or perhaps brutally honest, but he just smiled and recrossed his legs.

"Why should I give this seat to an old woman? There's absolutely no reason for me to give it up."

"Isn't it natural to hand over the priority seat to the elderly?"

"I don't understand. Priority seats are just priority seats, and there is no legal obligation for me to move. Whether or not I move should be decided by me,

who is currently sitting in this seat. Will you give up your seat because I am a young man? Hahaha, that's a stupid way of thinking."

It's a manner of speaking that one wouldn't expect from a high school student. His hair is dyed blond, and there are some unexpected traits for a high school student.

"I am a healthy young man. Certainly, I don't feel that standing up would inconvenience me. However, it is obvious standing up will consume more physical strength than sitting down will. I don't want to do such a useless thing. Or maybe, are you telling me to be more lively and energetic?"

"What, what kind of attitude is that towards your superiors!?"

"Superior? It's obvious that both you and the old woman have lived longer than me. There's no doubt about it. However, that 'above' refers to height. Also, I have a problem with you. Even if there is a difference in age, isn't that an awfully rude and impertinent attitude?" (T/N Superior in Japanese is literally "person above"—he is saying that the "above" in the word superior refers to height, not socially "above".) "Wha...! You're a high school student!? Honestly, just listen to what adults say!"

"It's fine, it's fine..."

The office lady was worked up, but the old woman didn't want to make the situation worse. She tried to calm her down with hand gestures, but the office lady continued to insult the high school student and looked like she was about to fly into a rage.

"Apparently the older woman seems to have better hearing than you do. Oh dear, I guess Japanese society isn't completely useless yet. Enjoy the rest of your life to your heart's content."

After showing a uselessly refreshing smile, he put headphones in his ears and began to listen to loud music. The office lady who spoke up was clenching her teeth in annoyance.

His self-important attitude annoyed her as she tried to argue with him.

Personally, I didn't get myself involved because I agreed, at least in part, with the boy.

Once the moral problem is solved, the obligation to give up a seat disappears.

“Sorry.....”

The office lady tried to hold back her tears while apologizing to the old woman.

A little incident happened on the bus. I was relieved that I wasn't involved in the situation. I don't care for things like giving up my seat to the elderly or stubbornly refusing to move from my seat.

The disturbance ended with the boy who won with his big ego. At least, everyone thought it was over.

“Um... I also think that the lady is right.”

An unexpected helping hand was extended. The owner of the voice seems stood next the office lady and bravely spoke her opinion to the boy. She wore the same school uniform as mine.

“This time it's a pretty girl, apparently I have luck with women today.”

“Grandmother, it looks like it's been hot for a while now. Won't you give up your seat? It may be none of your concern, but I think it will contribute to society.”



With a “pachin”, the boy snapped his fingers.

“Social contribution? I see, that’s an interesting way to put it. Giving seats to

the elderly may be a way of contributing to society. Unfortunately, I am not interested in contributing to society. I only think about my own satisfaction. Oh, and also. In this crowded bus, you're asking me, who's sitting in the priority seat, to give up my seat, but can't you ask the other people who are staying silent and leave me alone? If someone truly cares for the elderly, I think that 'priority seat here, priority seat there' would be a trivial concern."

The girl's intentions didn't reach the boy, and the boy's brazen attitude didn't change. Both the office lady and the old woman couldn't say anything and stood there with a bitter smile.

But the girl who stood up to the boy didn't crumble.

"Everyone. Please listen to me for at least a little bit. Can anyone give their seat for the old woman? Please, anyone."

How is there so much compassion, courage, and determination in those few words? It's rare to see such genuine intentions.

With her remark, the girl may have seemed like an annoyance. But she seriously appealed to the passengers without fear.

I was not in a priority seat but I was sitting near the old woman. By raising a hand and saying "here you go", this situation would be settled. The elderly would also calm down.

Like everyone else in the bus, though, I didn't move. No one felt it was necessary to move. The attitude and behavior of the boy had caught on with some of the passengers and they convinced themselves that the boy was right.

Of course, the elderly are undeniably important contributors and supporters of Japan.

But we, the youth, are the important human resources that will support Japan from now on.

Also, because the general population is gradually aging, our value is also increasing.

So, if you compare the youth and the elderly, it's obvious which one is more important now. Well, this is also a perfect argument, isn't it.

Somehow, I started to wonder what the other people would do. Looking around, people were pretending to not have noticed or had a hesitant look.

But—the girl who was sitting next to me was completely different.

Among the confusion, she had a completely expressionless look.

When I stared at her unintentionally because of her strangeness, our eyes met for just a moment. I could tell that we shared the same thoughts. Neither of us considered giving up our seats for the old woman.

“Oh, here you go!”

Soon after the girl’s appeal, a woman stood up. She gave up her seat, unable to endure the guilt.

“Thank you!”

When the girl lowered her head with a full smile, she pushed through the crowd and guided the old woman to the seat.

She thanked the girl over and over again, then sat down in her seat.

While watching the old woman and the girl, I folded my arms and closed my eyes.

The bus soon arrived at the destination, and stopped at the school.

As I got off the bus, there was a gate made of natural stone waiting for me.

All the boys and girls in uniform got off the bus and passed through the gate.

Koudo Ikusei High School.

A school created by the Japanese government that aims to nurture young people to support the future.

It is a place that I will attend starting from today.

Stop, take a deep breath.

Ok, let’s go!

“Wait a second.”

As I tried to take my first step of courage, I was instantly stopped as someone tried to talk to me.

I was stopped by the girl I sat next to on the bus.

"You were looking at me a while ago. Why?", she said with a firm look.

"Sorry. I was just a bit interested. Whatever the reason, you didn't have any thoughts of giving up your seat to the old woman, right?"

"Yeah yeah, I didn't want to give up my seat. What's wrong with that?"

"No, it's just that I thought the same thing. I also didn't have any intention of giving up my seat. I like to stay out of trouble; I don't like being concerned with such things." (T/N When he says "I like to stay out of trouble", he uses an idiom that is similar to "let sleeping dogs lie" in English but I felt it would be weird to put that here.) "Stay out of trouble? Don't compare me to you. I didn't give up my seat because I did not feel any sense in giving up the seat to an old woman."

"Isn't that worse than just staying out of trouble?"

"I don't know. I'm just acting on my own beliefs. It's different from people who avoid troublesome things like you. I don't want to spend time with people like you."

"... I feel the same way."

I just wanted to give my opinion, but I wasn't really in the mood to talk back and forth.

We both deliberately sighed and started walking in the same direction.

2

I don't like the entrance ceremony. A lot of first years think the same way.

The principal and the students are all thanking each other annoyingly, there's way too much standing, and it's a pain in the butt because there are too many troublesome things.

But that's not all I want to say.

The entrance ceremony for the elementary, middle, and high school marks the start of one major trial for students.

For the first few days after the entrance ceremony, students must make

friends in order to enjoy the rest of their school life.

If someone fails at this task, it is said that a miserable three years awaits them.

Following my principle of avoiding trouble, I think it would be best to make some friends and establish decent human relationships.

The day before, I tried to practice making friends because I was inexperienced.

First scenario was bursting into the classroom and then talking excitedly.

Second scenario was secretly passing a note with my email address on it. then becoming friends afterwards.

In my case, I had to practice because this is a completely different environment than I had been used for my whole life. I am completely alone. I entered the fierce battleground all by myself.

Overlooking the classroom, I walked over to the seat with my nameplate on it.

A seat towards the back of the room and near the window. Generally a good spot to get.

The classroom was only about half full.

Students were either looking at their class materials by themselves or were talking to acquaintances and friends.

Now, what should I do? Should I get to know people during this free time? Sitting a few seats in front of me, a chubby boy seemed lonely all by himself (my selfish imagination).

He gave off an aura of that screamed, “Someone talk to me and be my friend!” (again, my selfish imagination) However... if you suddenly walked up to someone and talked to them they would probably feel bothered.

Do you wait for the right time then? No, by then, he would probably be surrounded by enemies, and there's a high chance I'll become friendless.

As I expected, I should talk...

Wait, wait, don't be hasty.

If I carelessly jump in and talk to the unknown student, I might be beaten by someone else.

This is useless, a negative spiral...

In the end, I couldn't talk to anybody, and with the way things were going, I would soon be left all alone.

Is he still alone? Do I hear laughter? I must be hearing things.

I wonder what friends are. Where on earth do friends come from? Do people become friends after they eat with each other? Or do you become friends after going to the bathroom together?

The more I think about it, the more I don't understand it. Is it something deep? I should think about it more.

Trying to make new friends is really troublesome and tiring. In the first place, should I be trying to make friends like this? Furthermore, don't friendships form naturally over time? My mind is in complete disarray like a chaotic summer festival.

While my mind is still hazy and confused, the classroom quickly fills up as other students enter the classroom.

Oh well, I have no choice but to try.

After a long internal struggle, I started to get up from my seat. However...

As I got up, I noticed that the chubby boy wearing glasses was talking to another classmate.

With a bitter smile, I realized that there was no friendship to be made here. Good for you, glasses-kun...

You made your first friend—

"You, from before...!"

Feeling perplexed, I was doing some serious soul-searching.

Involuntary, I let out a deep sigh from the bottom of my lungs. My high school life seems very bleak.

I noticed that the classroom was nearly full, and then I heard someone

putting down their bag on the seat next to me.

“That’s a heavy sigh, even though the school semester hasn’t even started yet. I feel like sighing after meeting you again.”

The person who sat next to me was the girl I argued with after getting off the bus.

“… So we were in the same class, huh.” After all, there are only 4 first-year classes. It’s not like it’s probabilistically impossible that we were put in the same class.

“I am Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. Nice to meet you.”

“A sudden self-introduction?”

“Even if you call it sudden, it’s our second time talking to each other. Isn’t an introduction fine?”

Anyway, I previously had no way to introduce myself to anyone. Even to this cheeky girl. Although, in order to become familiar with the class, I wanted to learn my neighbor’s name at least.

“Do you mind if I reject your greeting?”

“I think it would be awkward if we didn’t know each other’s names, even though we sit next to each other.”

“I think it would be perfectly fine.”

After glancing at me, she put her bag on the desk. It seems like she won’t even tell me her name.

The girl showed no interest in the rest of the classroom, and sat down in her seat like a model.

“Is your friend in another class? Or are you coming to this high school alone?”

“You’re a curious one, aren’t you. You shouldn’t talk to me, since you won’t find me interesting anyway.”

“If I’m being a bother to you, just tell me to shut up.”

I thought that the conversation was over, but after a sudden change of heart, she sighed and looked at me.

“My name is Horikita Suzune.”

I didn't expect to receive an answer, but she... no, Horikita, introduced herself.

For the first time I saw her face.

... Wow, she's cute.

I mean, she's a beauty.

Even though she was in the same grade, she could probably pass as a second or third year student.

She looked like a mature woman.

“Let me start off by telling you a bit about myself. I have no particular hobbies, but I have an interest in everything. I don't have too many friends, but I think it would be good to have some friends. Well, that's the kind of person I am.”

“Sounds like a reply from someone who avoids troublesome situations. I don't think I'll ever like someone who thinks like that.”

“It feels like my whole existence has been denied in a single second...”

“I pray that no more misfortune befalls me.”

“I sympathize with you, but I don't think that'll come true.”

I pointed at the door to the classroom. The one standing there was——

“The equipment in this classroom seems to be in order! The classroom looks just like what the rumors say!”

It was the boy who argued with the girl in the bus.

“..... I see. Certainly is bad luck.”

It seems like not only us, but that problem child is also in the D class.

Without noticing us at all, he sat down at the seat marked “Koenji”. I wonder if he knows what the term “friendship” means. Let's try observing him for a bit.

Koenji then propped his legs onto the desk, took out a pair of nail clippers, and started doing maintenance on his fingernails. He acted as if he was the only

one there and ignored all of his surroundings.

His remarks on the bus seem to have come from his true thoughts.

In less than ten seconds, more than half the class backed away from Koenji. Even here, his self-important attitude penetrated the classroom.

Looking next to me, I noticed that Horikita was looking down at her desk, reading one of her own books.

Oops, I forgot that talking back and forth was one of the basics of holding a conversation.

One of my chances to become friends with Horikita was crushed.

Peeking at the title of the book, I saw that she was reading "Crime and Punishment".

That's interesting. Whether there is any reason to kill a person or not, it advocates killing. Maybe Horikita's hobbies are similar to the ones in the book. (T/N scary...) Anyway, since self-introductions were finished, it seems like we won't be interacting very often.

After a few minutes, the first bell rang.

Almost at the same time, a woman wearing a suit walked into the classroom.

On first impression, she seems like a teacher who finds strict classroom discipline important. She looks about 30 years old. Her long hair was tied back into a ponytail.

"Ahem, good morning new students. My name Chiyabashira Sae and I am in charge of class D this year. I teach Japanese history. This school doesn't rearrange the classes every year, so over the next three years, I hope I get to know all of you. Best regards. Although the entrance ceremony will be one hour from now in the gym, I will now distribute the list of special rules of this school and the matriculation guide."

From the front, the handouts were passed around.

At this school, there are special rules that make it different from every other high school. All students are required to live on campus, and are forbidden from contacting anyone outside the school.

Even contacting immediate family is impossible without the permission of the school.

Leaving school grounds is also forbidden.

However, there are also many other facilities so that students don't suffer from being restricted. There are karaoke rooms, theater rooms, cafes, and even boutiques—you can say it made up a small town. And in the middle of the big city, the huge campus took up more than 600,000 square meters.

There's one more special characteristic of this school, though. The introduction of the S system.

"I will now hand out student ID cards. With this card, you can buy anything from any of the shops and facilities around campus. It works like a credit card. However, be careful of how many points you use. There's nothing you can't buy at school. If there's something on school grounds, it's purchasable."

This point system associated with the student card essentially replaced money.

This way, every student would start off with the same amount of money and would be forced to check their consumption habits. In any case, all of the points are provided at no charge from the school.

"Student cards can be used by swiping them on the machines. Using the machines are really easy, so you won't have any trouble with them. The points will be automatically credited on the first day of the month. Everyone should already have 100,000 points on their card. Also, 1 point is worth 1 yen. Any more explanation is unnecessary."

For a moment, the classroom got loud.

In other words, for being admitted to this school, we got a 100,000 yen monthly allowance from the school. As expected from a school created by the Japanese government.

100,000 yen is a considerable amount of money given to students as a monthly allowance.

"Were you guys surprised by the amount of points given? This school

measures the abilities of students. Everyone here, who passed the entrance exam, has shown some level of merit and worth. The amount of money is a reflection of your skills. Use without holding back. After graduation, however, all the points will be taken back. Since it's impossible to change these points into cash, there's no point in saving up the points. How the points are used are up to you. Use it on things you like or need. If you feel that no use for some of your points, you can always transfer them to someone else. However, bullying other people for points is prohibited. The school is very strict on matters concerning bullying."

Chiyabashira-sensei looked around the room.

"It seems like no one has questions. Well then, please lead a good student life."

A lot of the classmates can't hide their surprise at the size of the allowance.

"It isn't as strict of a school as I thought it would be."

I thought I was talking to myself, but Horikita was looking my direction and thought that I was talking to her.

"It certainly seems like a lax school."

Although they force us to live in dorms, forbid us from going off campus, and prohibit us from contacting anyone on the outside, they give us a lot of points for free usable anywhere on campus.

It could be said that the students are put in paradise with preferential treatment.

And the biggest merit to Koudo Ikusei High School is their 100% employment rate.

Under the thorough guidance of the government, the school works towards a better future with all of its resources. In fact, many of this widely publicized school's alumni are famous people. Usually, no matter how famous and good a school is, its area of specialization is narrow. A school might specialize in sports, or specialize in music. Or maybe it specializes in computer related topics. But this school fulfills any wish in any genre that someone may wish to study. This is a school that has that kind of system and value.

That's why I thought the class atmosphere would be more competitive and bloodthirsty, but the majority of my classmates seemed like ordinary students you could find anywhere else.

No, maybe that's why everyone's so normal. We were already recognized as students who passed the entrance exam. Can we graduate peacefully and without incident...? I wonder if it's even possible.

"This much preferential treatment is a bit scary."

After listening to Horikita say that, I also felt the same way.

I think it would be better to stay ignorant of the details about this school.

Because they are able to fulfill any wish, I think there would be some risks associated with the school.

"Ne ne~, don't you want to go see those shops? Let's go shopping!"

"Un. With this much money, we can buy anything. It's great that I got into this school~"

After the teacher left the room, the students who received the large amount of money were restless.

"Everyone, can you guys listen to me for a bit?"

A student who had the air of a young man raised his hand and spoke.

His hair is not dyed and looked like an honors student. He didn't look like delinquent either.

"Starting from today, we will be in the same class for the next three years. So, it would be great if all of us could introduce ourselves and become friends. We still have time until the entrance ceremony, so what do you think?"

Oh... he said something amazing. A majority of the students couldn't find words to say.

"I agree! After all, we don't know each other names, let alone anything about each other."

After the first person agreed, the previously hesitant students subsequently voiced their support.

"My name is Hirata Yousuke. Because I was often called by my first name, Yousuke, in middle school, feel free to use my first name. Although I like all sports, I like soccer in particular, and also plan to play soccer at this school. Please take care of me."

The young man who proposed that the class introduce themselves smoothly and impeccably did his self introduction.

You really have a lot of guts. And you even talked about soccer. After talking about soccer with that refreshing expression, his popularity multiplied by 2 times, no, 4 times. Look, look, all the girls near Hirata have hearts in their eyes.

Like this, Hirata became the central figure of the class, and would probably draw everyone's attention until we graduated.

And then he would probably go out with the cutest girl in the class That's probably how things will end up.

"Well, if that was satisfactory... then, can we start self introductions from the beginning?"

Being smooth to the very end, Hirata asked for confirmation.

Although the first girl was perplexed and nervous, she soon made up her mind and stood up.

In other words, she was flustered by Hirata's words.

"M-my name Inogashira K-ko—"

As she tried to introduce herself, her words stopped in her mouth.

Whether her mind went blank or she couldn't collect her thoughts fully, she was unable to speak clearly. When words no longer came out, her face became pale in embarrassment. It's rare seeing someone get so nervous.

"Do your best~"

"It's ok if you don't rush~"

Those kind words came from a classmate. But those words backfired, and the words stuck in her throat disappeared. The silence continued for 5 seconds, then 10 seconds. The pressure was palpable.

Small giggles came from some of the girls in the classroom. She was paralyzed in fear. One of the girls spoke up.

“Doing it slowly is fine, don’t rush through it.”

Although her words were similar to “Do your best~” and “It’s ok if you don’t rush,” the meaning her words held was completely different.

To the nervous girl, the boys’ words seemed a bit forceful.

On the other hand, the girl’s words told her to go at her own pace, and felt more reassuring.

After regaining a bit of her composure, she breathed in and out to calm herself down.

Then after a little while...

“My name is, Inogashira... Kokoro. Um, my hobby is sewing and I’m good at knitting. P-please take care of me.”

From the first word, she said all she wanted to say without stopping.

With a relieved, delighted, and slightly embarrassed expression, Inokashira sit down.

Thanks to the help, Inogashira’s introduction finished without any trouble. Other self-introductions followed.

“I’m Yamauchi Haruki. In elementary school, I played table tennis at the national level, then was the baseball club’s ace in middle school—I had uniform number 4. But since I got an injury during Inter High recently, so I am currently in rehab. Nice to meet ya.”

I don’t think the number 4 has any meaning to it...

And Inter High is a sports tournament for high schools... You can’t compete as a middle schooler.

Or was he trying to tell a joke? I got the impression that he was a frivolous and loose-mouthed type of person.

“Then I’m next, right?”

The cheerful girl who stood up next was the one who told Inogashira to

introduce herself at her own pace.

And the girl that helped out the old woman on the bus that morning.

"My name is Kushida Kikyou, and since none of my friends from middle school came to this school, I want to get to know everyone and become friends!"

Most students finished their greetings after a few words, but Kushida continued to talk.

"First of all, I want to become friends with everyone here. After all of you are done with your introductions, please exchange contact information with me!"

Her words weren't just words. I could tell immediately that she was the type of girl to open up her heart immediately.



Her words to Inogashira weren't just encouragement that seemed appropriate for the situation, but were her true feelings.

Also, she seemed the type of person who would get along with everyone.

"Then, during vacations or after school, I want to make memories with many people, so please invite me to many events. I've been talking for a while, so I'll end my self-introduction here."

She'd definitely get along with all the boys and girls in the class.

... Of course, it's not like I'm critiquing other people's self-introductions.

I'm feeling a bit restless for some reason.

What I should say in my introduction... should I try to tell a joke too?

Or should I bring out laughs by creating high tension during my speech?

No, but I wonder. High tension would probably just ruin the mood. To begin with, I'm not that kind of character.

While I was lost in my own worries, the self-introductions continued.

"Then, the next one is—"

As Hirata looked at the next student, the next student shot him a sharp glare.

With bright red hair, the boy looked like a delinquent and spoke in a manner that matched his appearance.

"You guys idiots? I don't wanna introduce myself, just leave me alone."

Red hair glared at Hirata. Tension hung in the air.

"I can't force you to introduce yourself. But, I don't think that it's a bad thing to get along with your classmates. If you thought I was being unpleasant, I apologize."

After watching Hirata bow his head towards red hair, some of the girls glared at red hair.

"Isn't it fine to do a simple self introduction?"

"Yea, yea!"

As expected from the ikemen soccer boy. He seems to have quickly attracted the attention of the girls.

However, starting with red hair, the about half of the other boys stirred with

jealousy towards Hirata.

“No. I don’t want to pretend that we’re good friends.”

Red hair got up from his seat. At the same time, several other students left the room. They probably had no intention to get to know their classmates. Horikita also started to get up from her seat.

She looked at my direction, but when she realized that I wasn’t moving, she started walking out the room. Hirata looked a bit lonely as he saw the group walk out the classroom.

“They’re not bad people. I’m also at fault since I asked them to stay out of my own selfishness.”

“Hirata-kun did nothing bad. Let’s just leave those people alone.”

Even though some people left after not wanting to do self-introductions, the remaining students continued to go around and introduce themselves “I’m Ike Kanji. The things I like are girls, and the things I hate are ikemen. I’m looking for a girlfriend at any time, so nice to meet you! Of course, you better be cute or beautiful!”

It’s hard to tell if he said that as a joke or if it his true thoughts, but he earned the ire of the females.

“Wow, cool~. Ike-kun, you’re so smooth”, said one of the girls with a completely emotionless voice.

Of course, it was obvious that it was 1000% a lie.

“Really, really? Wow, I thought I wasn’t bad, but... hehe.”

Apparently Ike thought it was true and became a bit embarrassed.

Suddenly all the girls laughed.

“Wow, everyone, he’s cute. He’s recruiting girlfriends!”

No you’re being teased.

Ike waved his hand cheerfully while being teased. It doesn’t seem like he’s a bad person though.

Then, the boy who fought on the bus, Koenji, was up next.

After checking his bangs with a hand-mirror, he used a comb to arrange his hair.

"Um, can you introduce yourself"

"Fu~. Ok."

While smiling like a young noble, he showed glimpses of his impudent behavior.

I thought he would stand up, but Koenji kept his feet on the desk, and started his self-introduction while sitting like that.

"My name is Koenji Rokusuke. Being the only heir of the Koenji conglomerate, I am a man who will be responsible for Japanese society in the near future. Pleased to meet you, ladies."

It was an introduction for the women, as opposed to the whole class.

Some girls looked at Koenji with glittering eyes after hearing he was rich, while the others looked at him like he was crazy. ... That's natural.

"From now on, I will relentlessly punish anything that makes me feel uncomfortable. Be careful in that respect."

"Eh... Koenji-kun. What do you mean by 'anything that makes me uncomfortable'?"

Feeling uneasy at his words, Hirata asked him again.

"Exactly as I said. But if I were to give an example—I hate unattractive things. If I saw something ugly, I would do as I said."

He combed his hair upwards.

"Oh, thank you. I will make sure to be careful."

Red hair, Horikita, Koenji. Then Yamauchi and Ike. Apparently all the odd students were gathered in this class. During this short time, I was able to see a glimpse of the various students in my class.

I also have a an odd quirk—no, there's nothing special about me.

I wanted to become a free bird, but I flew from the cage all alone.

Without putting much thought into it, I wanted to experience the freedom.

If you look outside, you can see the gracefulness of the birds... which you can't see at this time.

I'm that kind of man, anyway.

"Um... the next person—please introduce yourself."

"Eh?"

My turn had come while I was still lost in my delusions. A lot of the students were waiting for me to give my introduction. Oi oi, don't look at me with that much anticipation (my imagination).

Oh well, I'll go all out for this self-introduction.

Alright! Get up and start.

"Well Um, my name is Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. The, er... there's nothing particular about me, I will do my best to get along with everyone, uh, nice to meet you."

After finishing my greeting, I quickly sat back down.

Fu... Did everyone see it? My self introduction.

... failed!

I buried my face in my hands.

I was too busy lost in my delusions, so I couldn't come up with the proper words in advance.

It was such a boring, lame introduction that no one will remember later.

"Nice to met you Ayanokouji-kun. I also want to get alone with everyone, so let's do our best."

Hirata said with a refreshing smile.

Everyone clapped. I feel like everyone clapped after seeing through my mistake.

At the same time, I felt strangely hurt from their pity.

I was still happy, though.

3

Even though this school is hard, the entrance ceremony is the same here as it is at any other school.

After a speech of thanks from some principal or other director, the ceremony ended.

And then it was noon. After we got an explanation of all the buildings and facilities on campus, the group split up.

70, 80% of the students started heading for the dorms. The rest of the students formed small groups and walked towards the cafes and the karaoke rooms. The whole crowd soon disappeared.

On my way to the dorms, I decided to go to the convenience store, which was on the way. Of course I was alone. I knew no one else.

“... What an unpleasant coincidence.”

Once I entered the convenience store, I immediately ran into Horikita again.

“Don’t be so hostile. Rather, did you also have stuff to buy?”

“Yea, just a bit. I came to buy some necessities.”

Horikita talked while examining shampoo that she took from the shelf.

Dormitory life starts from today, you need much more than just “a bit”... Girls also need various products.

She quickly put the shampoo and other daily necessities into her basket. I thought she would go for good quality items, but she only went for the cheapest one available.

“I thought girls paid more attention to what kind of shampoo they used.”

“That depends on the type person, no? The type of person who doesn’t know where they should be spending their money.”

She sent me a cold gaze that said, “Could you not look at other people’s stuff without permission?”

“Also, I didn’t expect you to stay in the classroom for self-introductions. You

don't look like the type of person to be in that group of classmates."

"I'm trying to be in that group quietly precisely because I try to avoid trouble. Why didn't you participate in the self-introductions? It's only a short greeting. You could get along with the others and get the chance to make friends."

Also, a lot of the students exchanged contact address with each other.

If Horikita had participated, she probably would've been popular in the class. What a waste.

"There are a lot of reasons I could give you, but should I give a simple explanation? Even if I introduced myself, it's not guaranteed that I would get along with everyone. Rather, it would've probably created problems instead. If I don't do the introduction, none of these problems occur. Right?"

"But there's still a high probability that you would get along with everyone..."

"Where'd you get that probability from? I say that, but we would endless argue over it if we tried to debate that, so let's just say that the probability is high. So, did you get along with anyone?"

"Uu..."

She looked at me while talking.

... I see. Surprisingly, she's right.

Actually, I was unable to exchange contacts with anybody.

It couldn't be used as evidence to prove that there was a high probability of getting along if she did introduce herself. I averted my gaze at Horikita's words.

"In other words, you have no proof that self-introductions make finding friends easy."

Horikita continued.

"To begin with, I never intended to make friends. So, there's no need for me to introduce myself, and no need for me to listen to anyone else's introduction. Are you convinced now?"

She did reject me the first time I tried to introduce myself...

It might've been a miracle to have gotten her name in the first place.

When I asked if I shouldn't have introduce myself, she shook her head though.

People have various different ways of thinking; it's impossible to deny that.

Horikita is a much more isolated, no, aloof, type of person than I thought.

We didn't even look at each other as we wandered about in the convenience store.

Even though her personality is a bit uptight, it didn't feel uncomfortable walking together.

"Wow~. They even have all the different kinds of cup noodles, this school's really convenient~"

In front of the instant food section, two boys were being noisy. After throwing a bunch of cup noodles into their basket, the two of them went to the register. They also had lots of snacks and drinks that filled up the whole basket. Since there are a lot of points that may be left over, it's only natural that they try to spend it somehow.

"Cup noodles... so they had that kind of section too, huh."

Learning this kind of stuff was one of my goals in going to the convenience store.

"So boys really do like this kind of stuff? I don't think it's really good for the body though."

"Eh, I was just considering if I should buy it."

I picked up a cup noodles bowl and looked at the price.

It said it was 156 yen, but I wasn't sure whether that was high or low for a bowl of cup noodles.

Even though the school calls it "points," the prices are all written in yen.

"Hey, what do you think of these prices? Do they look cheap or expensive?"

"Hmm... I can't really tell, but did you find something with a strange price?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I just wanted to ask."

The prices on the goods in the store seemed to be about right.

Also, it really does seem like 1 point is equal to 1 yen.

Given that the average high school student's allowance is about 5,000 yen, our monthly allowance is 20 times bigger.

Sensing my suspicious behavior, Horikita looked at me strangely.

I took the closest bowl of cup noodles to throw off her suspicions.

"Wow, this is really big. It's a G cup!"

It looks like it stands for "giga cup," but for some reason it makes me feel full just looking at it.

On an unrelated note, Horikita's breasts aren't small, but aren't large either. They are just the perfect size.

"Ayanokouji-kun. Did you just think of something inappropriate?"

"... No, of course not."

"You were acting strangely though..."

With just a glance, she was able to tell that I was thinking of strange things. She's sharp.

"I was thinking about what I should buy. Which one looks better?"

"If it's just that, then it's fine. You should stop buying those unhealthy foods. The school has a lot of better food options, so don't make a habit out of it."

As she said, there's no need to stick to instant fast food.

However, I had an irrepressible urge to buy a few more, so I took a regular sized instant noodle bowl (it said FOO Yakisoba on it) and put it in my basket.

Horikita drew her attention away from the food section and started to look at the necessities section of the store.

Now I could finally score some points with Horikita by telling some witty jokes.

"Wow, this razor has five blades! Seems like it would shave super cleanly."
(T/N not sure what the joke is here, probably some pun I don't understand)

"The hell, what would I shave with that?"

I held the razor blade, feeling proud of my joke, but the reaction was different than I expected. I thought she would smile, but she was looking at me like I was disgusting.

"... You know, there's nothing to shave on my chin or even under my armpits."

That hurt my heart. I guess my joke doesn't work on females.

"I'm envious of your courage to say that to someone you randomly met."

"... You've also been saying shit to someone you just met too."

"Really? I was only saying the facts. Unlike you."

She returned my words calmly and shut me up. Granted, I was saying some stupid stuff. The smooth Horikita, though, showed no signs of saying crude things.

Horikita once again chose the cheapest facial cleanser. I think girls should pay more attention to themselves.

"I think this one looks better, doesn't it?"

I grabbed a facial cleanser that was a bit more expensive and looked creamier.

"Not necessary."

I was refused.

"No, but—"

"I already said I didn't need it, didn't I?"

"Yea..."

I gently returned the cleanser back on the shelf as she glared at me.

I thought I could make conversation without getting her mad, but I failed.

"You're not very good at socializing. You suck at coming up with things to talk about."

"Even coming from you... I guess it's pretty true."

"Of course. I have a pretty good eye for people. Normally, I wouldn't want to

hear you speak twice, but I will put in the painful effort to listen to you.”

For some reason I tried to make friends with her, but my expectations were completely off.

With that, our conversation grinded to a halt. As two girls entered the store and started shopping, I realized something new.

Horikita's really cute.

“Hey. What are these for?”

As I looked for things to talk about, I saw something unusual.

In the corner of the convenience store, I saw individual portions of food and supplies.

At first glance, they looked the same as everything else, but with one major difference.

“Free... ?”

Also feeling interested, Horikita picked up one of the items.

Daily necessities such as toothbrushes and bandages were put in a bin labeled “free of charge”. The bin also had the words, “3 items per month” written on it, and it was obvious that these were different from the other goods.

“I wonder if this is emergency relief for those who have used up all their points. What a surprisingly lenient school.”

I wonder if they're only thorough with these kind of services, though.

“Hey, just wait a bit! I'm looking for it now!”

Interrupting the peaceful background music was a loud voice from the middle of the store.

“Hurry up! Everyone's waiting!”

“Oh, really!? Tell them to complain directly to me!”

It sounded like there was trouble.. Two boys were glaring at each other as they started to quarrel. The one with a disgruntled face was the all too familiar red hair guy. He was clutching cup noodles in one of his hands.

“What’s happening here?”

“Oh? Who’re you?”

I meant to talk amicably, but red hair mistook me for another enemy and shot me a glare.

“I’m Ayanokouji from the same class. I spoke up because I thought there was trouble here.”

After explaining, red hair lowered his voice after understanding the situation.

“Oh... I remember you. I forgot my student card. Forgot that that thing is practically money from now on.”

After seeing his empty hands, he started to head for the dorms. He probably forgot it there.

To be honest, it didn’t fully sink in yet that the cards were needed for every payment.

“If it’s fine with you, I can pay for it now. It’d be troublesome to go back to get it—I don’t mind if you use my points.

“... That’s true. It’s annoying. Good thing you’re here, thanks.”

The distance to the dorm isn’t a big deal. But by the time he would’ve gotten back, the line would probably get long since it’d be lunch time.

“... I’m Sudou. I owe you one.”

“Nice to meet you, Sudou.”

I took the cup noodles from Sudou then walked over to the hot water dispenser. Horikita was amazed after seeing that short exchange.

“You’re a pushover even from the first meeting. Are you going to be his obedient servant? Or is this how you’re trying to make friends?”

“Rather than making friends, I was just trying to help. Nothing else.”

“You don’t seem to be scared at his appearance either.”

“Scared? Why would I be scared? Because he looks like a delinquent?”

“A normal person would probably stay away from that kind of person.”

"Nah, he doesn't even look like a bad person anyway. Also, you don't look scared either."

"Only people without any method of protecting themselves stay away from those types. If he seemed violent, I'd repel him away from me. That's why I'm not really afraid."

Whenever Horikita says something, it's always something unusual. First of all, when she says "repel," what does she mean? Is she carrying around some kind of anti-molester spray?

"Let's finish shopping. It'd bother other students if we loitered around too long."

We finished up our shopping. After presenting the student ID card to the machine, the transaction was quickly completed. It was even faster because there was no small change involved.

"It's really usable as money..."

The receipt showed the prices of each good and the leftover amount of points. The payment went off without a hitch. While waiting for Horikita, I put hot water into the cup noodles. I thought it'd be more difficult to open the lid and pour in the hot water, but it was surprisingly easy. (T/N is this guy an idiot?) At any rate, this is a really weird school.

What kind of merit does each individual student have that warrants that big of an allowance?

Since my grade has about 160 people in it, by simple calculation, the high school should have about 480 people total. Even in a month that's already 48 million yen. In a year, 560 million.

Even if it's backed by the country, it still seems like overkill.

"I wonder what benefit it would bring to the school. 100,000 yen is a lot to give someone."

"Well... There seem to be way too many facilities for the number of students, and it doesn't seem necessary to give the students that much money. The students may neglect their studies because they have so much money."

I'm not sure if this is our reward for passing the test.

By talking about money, the students might be motivated to work harder.

But, without any conditions attached, 100,000 yen was handed out to everyone.

"It's not something I can really tell you to do, but it's probably better to save your money. Bad habits are difficult to fix. Once humans get used to a comfortable life, it's hard to let it go. The mental shock would certainly be pretty big."

"I'll take that to heart."

I never intended to throw away my money on random expenses originally, but she made a valid point.

After finishing the transaction, Sudou was waiting in front of the convenience store.

Seeing me come out, Sudou waved his hand at me. When I also waved to return his feeling, I felt a bit embarrassed yet happy at the same time.

"... Are you actually trying to eat here?"

"Of course I am. It's common sense, where else would I eat?"

When Sudou answered like that, I was surprised and Horikita let out an exasperated sigh.

"I'm going to go home. It feels like my dignity is slowly degrading away here."

"What dignity are you talking about? You're just a normal high school student. Or are you some kind of ojousama?"

Even though Sudou snapped at Horikita, she didn't even bat an eye.

Feeling irritated, Sudou put down his cup noodles and stood up.

"Ah—? Listen to people when they speak. Hey!"

"What's up with him? Suddenly getting angry."

Horikita continued to ignore Sudou and talked to me.

Having being pushed over the edge, Sudou shouted in anger.

“Come over here! I’ll beat you up!”

“I’ll admit Horikita’s attitude was bad. But your behavior isn’t very good either.”

Sudou’s patience seems to have run out.

“So? Her attitude’s way too cheeky for a woman!”

“For a woman? That kind of thinking is outdated. Don’t be friends with someone like him.”

With that, Horikita turned around, ignoring Sudou to the very end.

“Hey wait! Damn woman!”

“Calm down.”

I held back Sudou who was trying to reach for Horikita.

Without even looking back, Horikita headed back for the dorms.

“What kind of person acts like that? Dammit!”

“There are many different types of people, you know.”

“Hmph. I hate that kind of person.”

He was watching me cautiously. Sudou grabbed the cup noodles, tore off the cover and started eating.

A little while ago, he also fought at the register—it seems like he has a low boiling point for his anger.

“Hey, are you a first year? That’s our spot.”

As I watched Sudou slurp up his noodles, a group of three boys walked out of the convenience store carrying similar bowls.

“Who are you guys? We’re using this spot right now. You’re blocking the way. Fuck off.”

“Didn’t you hear him? Scram. Some cheeky first year brat.”

The three laughed at Sudou. Sudou stood up and threw his cup noodles on the ground. Soup and noodles splattered onto the ground.

"The first year's trying to fight, ha— what!?"

... That's not it. Sudou has a low tolerance for anger. He's the type of person to try to intimidate the other party.

"These second years are saying some bullshit things. We're already sitting here."

The second year senpais put down their stuff right there too. And then they began to laugh.

"Yup, we're here too. So scram, this is our spot."

"You guys have some nerve, you shits."

Sudou didn't falter from the difference in numbers. Looks like a fistfight will start anytime soon now. I, of course, didn't count myself in those numbers.

"Wow—— so scary. What class are you guys in. Oh wait, never mind. Let me guess... you're in class D right?"

"So what!?"

After Sudou said that, all the upperclassmen looked at each other, and laughed at the same time.

"Did you hear? He's in the D class! It was really obvious!"

"Oh? What do you mean by that, huh?"

As Sudou was getting heated, the boys took a step back.

"Because you guys are so pitiful I'll let you stay there for today. Let's go."

"You guys running away!?"

"The dog's barking! Anyway, you guys will face hell soon enough anyway."

Face hell?

They clearly looked calm and composed. I wonder what they meant by "face hell".

I thought that this school was for those fancy obocchans or ojousamas, but there are quite a few people like Sudou or that group of three earlier.

"Dammit, if it were girls or nice second-years it would've been fine, but we

got that stupid bunch.”

Sudou shoved his hands in his pockets and headed back without even cleaning up the noodles.

I looked at the outside of the convenience store. Two surveillance cameras had been placed there.

“There’ll probably be problems later, huh.”

Reluctantly, I reached down and starting cleaning up the mess.

As soon as the second-years knew Sudou was class D, their opinions changed instantly.

Although I felt anxious about it, there was no way for me to understand why.

4

Around 1pm, I reached the dorms that would be my home for the next three years.

After the first floor receptionist gave me a card key for the room 401 and an information manual, I got on the elevator. While flipping through the manual, I saw the time and day for the garbage disposal and a warning to not make too much noise. It also said not to waste water and electricity as much as possible.

“They don’t actually have limits on gas and electricity usage, huh...”

I thought that they would subtract from our points automatically.

This school really went through great lengths for the sake of the students.

I was surprised that they implemented coed dorms though. For a school that prohibits relationships between students, the coed dorms felt out of character. In other words, sex was a no-no.

Well, obviously.

It’s hard to believe that such a pampered and easy life can train students to be admirable adults, but given the current situation, the students should probably use all they were given.

The room is about 8 tatami mats big. This is my house starting from today. It's also my first time living alone. Until graduation, I would have to live without contacting anyone outside of school.

Unintentionally, I let out a smile.

The school had a high employment rate, and boasted the best facilities and opportunities out of all high schools in Japan.

For me, though, these weren't as important to me. I had one big reason for choosing this school. In middle school, I was forbidden from associating with friends, relatives, and other students.

That's why I chose this school.

I'm free. Freedom. In English that's "freedom". In French it's "liberté".

Isn't freedom the best? I can eat, sleep, and play when I want to. Without having anyone order me around, I can graduate with peace now.

Frankly speaking, before I passed the exam, the result didn't matter to me.

There was only a slight difference between passing and not passing.

However, when the results came out, I was really happy that I got in.

No one can judge me or order me around now.

I can redo... no, start anew. A new start, a new life.

Anyway, I plan to have a fun student life from now on.

Not caring about my uniform, I jumped onto the bed. Feeling far from tired, I tried to calm myself down, looking forward to my future school life.

Chapter 2: The students of class D

On the second day of school, even though it was technically the first day of classes, the majority of the day was spent going over policies and rules. Many of the students had their expectations completely blown away by how nice and friendly the teachers were. Having already made a big commotion the other day, Sudou was left alone as he slept like a log during class. The teachers noticed him sleeping, but no one made an indication as to stop him.

After all, deciding to listen to the lesson or not is our choice, so the teacher wasn't concerned. Is this how teachers interact with students that are no longer part of compulsory education?

In this relaxed atmosphere, it soon became lunchtime. Getting up from their seats, the students started to go out to eat lunch with their acquaintances. I couldn't help but look in envy towards the others. Sadly, I wasn't able to make any close friends with my classmates.

"Pitiful."

The only person who noticed my feelings sneered at me.

"... What. What's pitiful?"

"I want someone to invite me. I want to eat lunch with somebody.' Your thoughts are really obvious."

"You're also by yourself. Don't you feel the same way? Or do you plan on staying alone for the next three years?"

"Yes. I like being alone."

She replied quickly, without any hesitation. It seems like she really feels that way.

"Instead of worrying about me, go worry about yourself."

"Well..."

After all, it wasn't me that proudly said that I couldn't make friends.

To be honest, it seems like the near future will be troubling because I couldn't make any friends.

After all, being alone also stands out. If I became the object of bullying, I would certainly be conspicuous.

Not even a minute after the bell rang, half the class became empty.

The people who are left either want to go but are alone just like me, are sleeping and not paying attention, or like being alone like Horikita.

"I was thinking of going to eat, does anyone want to come with me?"

Hirata said as he stood up.

With that kind of thinking, he looks like a real riajuu.

I'd been waiting for my savior to come all along—it's a perfect chance for me.

Hirata, I'm coming now. Steeling my nerves, I slowly raised my hand...

"I'm going too~!" "Me too me too!"

When I saw Hirata surrounded by girls, I put my hand back down.

Why did those girls take *my* spot? That was my chance to be friends with him! Just because he's an ikemen doesn't mean that you guys can thoughtlessly go to the cafeteria with him!

"How sad."

Another derisive laugh and a disdainful look came from Horikita.

"Don't try to guess what other people are thinking."

"Is there anything else?"

Feeling a bit lonely from the lack of other boys, Hirata looked around the room.

When he spotted me, our eyes met.

It's here! Hirata noticed me! A man who wants you to invite him is here!

After meeting eyes, his gaze locked onto me.

As expected from the riajuu, he understood my troubles!

“Umm, Ayanoko——”

Hirata tried to call out my name, but at that moment,

“Hirata-kun, hurry up!”

The girls took a hold of Hirata’s arms without noticing me at all.

Ahh... Hirata’s gaze was stolen by the girls. Afterwards, he and the girls exited the classroom. The only thing that remained was my outstretched arm.

Feeling embarrassed, I pretended I stretched my arm to scratch my head.

“Well then.”

Sending me one last look of pity, Horikita left the classroom by herself.

“That was useless...”

Reluctantly, I stood up by myself and decided to go to the cafeteria all alone.

If I don’t feel like eating alone, I’ll just go buy something at the convenience store.

“Ayanokouji-kun... right?”

On my way towards the cafeteria, I was suddenly stopped by a beautiful girl. She’s Kushida, one of my classmates.

Because it was the first time I looked at her from the front, my heart went doki doki.

Straight, short, brown hair that reached the top of the shoulders. It wasn’t crude by any means, but the school recently approved shorter skirts, so it was obvious that her uniform was a newer one.

In her hand was a pouch with a lot of keyholders on it—I couldn’t tell if she was carrying a pouch or if she was carrying a lot of keyholders.

“I’m Kushida in the same class. Will you remember my name?

“Sure, I guess I can. What do you need from me?”

“Actually... I would like to ask you something. It’s a short question, but Ayanokouji-kun, by any chance, are you on good terms with Horikita-san?”

“We’re not particularly close. Just acquaintances. Did she do something?”

It seems that when her goal was to ask about Horikita. I feel a bit sad.

“Oh, I see. Weren’t you two getting along on the first day of school though? I was asking everyone one by one for their contact info, but... Horikita refused to tell me.”

That girl, what is she doing? If she was asked for her contact by an assertive girl like her, she could’ve helped me out and shared it with me. Afterwards, I might have gotten familiar with the class.

“Also, on the day of the entrance ceremony, weren’t you two talking to each other in front of the school?”

Considering that we were also on the same bus together, it’s not surprising that she saw the two of us together.

“What kind of personality does Horikita have? Is she the type to only speak her mind to her close friends?”

Even though she wants to get to know Horikita, I can only listen to her questions but not answer any of them.

“I think she’s not very good at interacting with others. Why do you want to know about Horikita?”

“During the self-introductions, Horikita-san walked out of the room, right? It looked like she didn’t talk to anybody, so I was worried about her.”

She did say that she wanted to get along with everyone in her introduction.

“I understand, but I only met her yesterday, so I can’t really help.”

“Fuun... so that’s how it was. I thought you two were friends before coming to high school. Sorry for asking you a weird question out of the blue!”

“No, it’s fine. Why do you know my name though?”

“What, didn’t you introduce yourself? I made sure to memorize everyone’s names.

Kushida listened to my lame self-introduction.

For some reason I feel really glad hearing that.

“Once again, let’s get along well, Ayanokouji-kun!”

Although I felt a bit perplexed by her outstretched hand, I wiped my hands on my pants and then shook her hand.

“Nice to meet you too...”

Today was a lucky day. Even though there were some bad moments, there were also good ones.

And since humans think conveniently, I quickly forgot about the bad moments of the day.

1

Eventually, after peeking through the cafeteria door, I decided to go to the convenience store, bought some bread, and returned to the classroom.

A group of friends were eating with their desks next to each other, while there were various students quietly eating alone. The only thing common was that nearly everyone had a bento from either the convenience store or the cafeteria.

I was going to start eating when I saw that Horikita had already returned to her seat.

She had on her desk a sandwich that looked delicious.

I returned to my seat without saying anything.

When I was about to take my first bite of my bread, music started to play out of the speakers.

“Today, at 5pm in gymnasium number 1, there will be a club fair. For those of you with an interest in clubs, please come to gymnasium number 1. I repeat, today—”

A girl with a cute voice made an announcement over the PA.

Clubs, huh. I’ve never been in a club before.

“Hey, Horikita—”

“I have no interest in clubs.”

“... I didn’t even ask anything yet.”

“Ok, then what?”

“Are you going to participate in any clubs?”

“Ayanokouji-kun. Do you have dementia? Or are you just an idiot? Didn’t I say from the beginning that I have no interest in clubs?”

“Just because you don’t have any interest doesn’t mean you won’t participate.”

“That’s a frivolous argument. Don’t make that kind of pointless talk.”

“Ok...”

Horikita has no interest in clubs or making friends. Whenever I talk to her, she looks annoyed. I wonder if she came to this school just for the education or the high employment rate.

It wouldn’t be surprising if that was her only reason, but it seems unnatural.

“You really don’t have any friends, I see.”

“That’s wrong. Now I can talk to you pretty well.”

“You say that, but don’t count me as one of your friends.”

“R-right, sure...”

“Since you want to go see the clubs, do you intend to enter any clubs?”

“No, I’m still thinking about it. I probably won’t join one though.”

“If you’re not going to join a club, why are you going to the club fair? Strange. Are you using clubs as a pretext to make friends?”

How is she so smart? No, it’s probably that I’m too easy to understand.

“Because I failed on the first day, clubs are my last chance to make any friends.”

“Isn’t it fine to invite anyone other than me?”

“It’s because I have no one else to invite that I’m having trouble!”

“That’s true. However, I don’t think that Ayanokouji-kun seriously means the

things you say. If you really wanted a friend, you'd probably talk more earnestly."

"Because that's not possible for me, I tread the path of loneliness."

Horikita quietly resumed eating her sandwich.

"I can't really understand that kind of contradictory thinking."

I want friends, but I can't make friends. It seems that Horikita couldn't understand that.

"Did you ever do any clubs?"

"No. I have no experience in any clubs."

"Then do you have any experience with things outside of clubs? Oh, you're talking about something like this and that?"

"... What are you trying to say? I feel the malice behind your words."

"Malice? I didn't even tell you what I was referring to though."

I received a chop to my side in a quick motion.

I reflexively coughed from her unexpected strength.

"Hey, what was that for!?"

"Ayanokouji-kun. I've warned you already, but it seems like you don't listen to what I say. Remember that I'm capable of inflicting more pain than I just did."

"No violence! Violence doesn't solve anything!"

"Really? Ever since the beginning of time, violence has existed because it is the most efficient way of resolving problems. It is the fastest way of either getting your point across to the other party or ignoring the other party's desires. After all, even countries employ police who use weapons and violence to arrest people, right?

"You sure talk a lot..."

She gave me a grand speech, asserting that she did nothing wrong. Whenever she made a remark, she would say absurd things and use it to viciously retort.

"From now on, I will use violence in order to fix the errors of your ways. How

about it?"

"How would you feel if I said the same thing to you?"

I wonder why they call men who raise their hand against a women the lowest and cowardly.

"It doesn't matter, because don't you think that'll never happen? After all, I never say something I shouldn't."

That was an answer that came far out of left field. She seems to believe that she's never wrong.

Even though she looks and acts in a civil manner, she's mean on the inside.

"I got it, I got it. I'll be really careful from now on."

Giving up on inviting Horikita, I looked out the window. Ah, the weather's good today.

"Club activities... is it. I see..."

Horikita mumbled as she pondered over something.

"Only a bit after school is ok, right? I'll go with you."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Didn't you say it yourself? That you wanted to go to the club fair."

"Oh, right. I never intended to stay long. After all, I was only looking for an excuse. Is that fine?"

"If it's only for a short while. Then, I'll see you after school."

After that, she resumed eating. Looks like she decided to go along with my attempt to make more friends.

Earlier I said that she was unpleasant to talk to, but her attitude seems to be taking a turn for the better.

"Looking at you trying to make friends and failing sounds interesting."

Never mind, she's still unpleasant.

"Wow, it's bigger than I thought it'd be."

Horikita and I met after school to go to the gymnasium.

Almost everyone there were first years; around 100 people were waiting nearby.

Waiting around the back, we were waiting for the club fair to start.

As we entered the gym, pamphlets with details about club activities were passed out.

"I wonder if this school has a particularly famous club. For example... something like a karate club?"

"A lot of clubs here seem to be high-leveled. There are a lot of members in a lot of clubs that are nationally known."

Even though this school isn't particularly known for their sports like baseball or volleyball, it isn't like the club activities are at the "hobbyist" level.

"The facilities are also high quality. Look, they even have oxygen capsules. All the equipment put pro's equipment to shame. Ah, but it looks like they don't have a karate club."

"... I see."

"Why, are you interested in karate?"

"No, not particularly."

"But you know, it looks like an inexperienced person will have a hard time joining a sports club. Even if someone made their high school debut, they would be a substitute for an eternity. I don't think it would be fun."

Everything around here seems too orderly and tidy.

"Isn't that dependent on the effort they put in? After 1 to 2 years of training, anyone can become good."

Training... I don't think I would be able to put in much effort.

"I didn't think that the word 'training' existed for people who avoid trouble like you."

“What does avoiding trouble have to do anything with this?”

“Doesn’t someone who avoids trouble also avoid any sort of manual labor? If you’ve declared that you avoid trouble, you should stick to your word until the very end.”

“I don’t take it that far...”

“If you’re always noncommittal like that, you’re never going to make friends.”

“Your words wound my heart.”

“Thank you for waiting, first year students. A representative from each club will explain their activities and how to join. I am Tachibana, the secretary of the student council and the chairman responsible for this club fair. Nice to meet you.”

After the greeting from Tachibana, the club representatives lined up on the stage of the gym.

There were various representatives, ranging from those wearing judo uniforms to beautiful kimonos.

“Hey, if you ever change your mind, try joining a sports club. Doesn’t that judo club look good? That senpai looks nice and encouraging.”

“What part of him looks nice and encouraging? That gorilla looks like he could kill someone at any time.”

“He’d probably preach to you that judo is an easy sport.”

“Just stop!”

I thought that the conversation was really going somewhere, but she was just being rude again.

“Even if that was the case, the sports clubs clearly don’t welcome any beginners, looking at how they’re showing off.”

“They should be welcomed. The more the people they get, the more money the school gives them and so they’d be able to get more equipment.”

“That’s just using new members as a way to get money...”

“It’d be ideal to recruit a lot of new members, increase the budget, then get

them to become ghost members. You need to be able to skillfully manipulate the rules in the world.”

“What a bad world... Your way of thinking is certainly strange.”

“My name is Hashigaki, and I’m the captain of the archery club. I think there are a lot of students who find it old-fashioned and simple, but it is a really fun and fulfilling sport. We give all new students a warm welcome, so if you’re interested, please join.”

A girl wearing archery clothes started her introduction on the stage.

“Look, they seem to welcome beginners. How about you try joining? To make their budget bigger.”

“Joining a club for that reason is a definite no! Also, a sports club is a meeting place for riajuus. Without knowing anyone, it wouldn’t be fun at all and I’d probably leave in an instant.”

“Isn’t that way of thinking a result of your twisted personality?”

“Yup, absolutely. A sports club is definitely impossible.”

I wouldn’t even want to do a part-time job that is completely lax and requires little effort.

Furthermore, I would probably only join a club if it was easy to join, calm, and quiet.

“Tsu... !”

As the club representatives introduced their clubs one by one, Horikita suddenly tensed up. She was looking towards the stage, her face pale.

“What’s wrong?”

In her tensed state, she looks as if she didn’t hear me.

I also looked towards the stage, but I didn’t see anything in particular.

The baseball club representative was giving his introduction while wearing a uniform.

Did she fall in love at first sight with him? Doesn’t seem like it.

Surprise? Disgust? Or maybe joy? To be honest, her expression is complex, making it hard to read her face.

"Horikita. What's wrong?"

"..."

Can she really not hear me? She just stared at the stage.

I'll stop talking and wait for an explanation.

The baseball club didn't seem particularly more interesting than the others.

No matter how well they welcome beginners, or how appealing their meeting location and times are, it's just another normal introduction. It wasn't just the baseball club, all the clubs seemed ordinary. If I learned anything interesting from these explanations, it was that minor clubs like tea ceremony and calligraphy clubs existed, and that the minimum number of people needed for a new club is 3.

Every time a new club starts their explanation, the first-years chat amongst their friends about the previous club.

The gym had a lively atmosphere to it. The club representatives, and not to mention the supervising teacher, continued their explanations with displeased looks. They must be frantic to get as many new members as possible.

As the senpais finished their explanations, they got off the stage and walked over to some tables. They're probably setting up a reception area so they can talk to people one-on-one and sign them up.

Eventually, all the people on stage walked off until one person was left. Everyone's gaze was centered on the stage. I realized that Horikita had been staring at that one person the whole time.

The person was about 170cm in height, which wasn't that tall. A slender body, sleek black hair. Sharp glasses, and a calculating gaze.

The student standing in front of the microphone looked over the first-years with a calm look.

What kind of club is he from, and what explanation will he give? My interest

has been piqued. (T/N The person's gender isn't yet revealed, but I just used "he" to avoid saying "person" or "student" over and over again.) However, my interest vanished the next second. He was completely silent.

Maybe his mind went blank. Maybe he felt nervous and his voice didn't come out.

"Do your best~"

"Did you forget to bring your notecards~?"

"Ahahaha!"

The first years threw those words at the person. However, the senpai on stage didn't waver at all. Neither the laughter nor the encouragement seemed to reach him.

Even when the laughter started dying down, his apathetic face didn't change.

The students started wondering "What is this senpai doing?" and the gym got noisy.

Even then, the boy didn't stir. He just stood there quietly, looking at the first-years. (T/N gender is revealed here) Horikita also stared at the boy with an intense gaze.

The relaxed atmosphere gradually shifted in an unexpected direction. It was an electrifying change in mood.

Eventually, the whole gym was enveloped in a tense and quiet atmosphere.

There were no instructions given out, no one dared to talk—it was a dreadful silence.

No one could open their mouths to talk. This silence has been going on for 30 seconds already...

The student on stage started talking.

"My name is Horikita Manabu, and I am the student council president."

Horikita? I looked at Horikita next to me. I wonder if they're related...

"The student council is also looking for first-years to replace the graduating third-years. There are no strict requirements to apply for the position, but those

who are interested should not be affiliated with any other clubs. Generally, we do not accept any candidate involved in other clubs.”

His tone was soft, but the mood was still tense. He alone silenced the whole gym.

Of course, it wasn’t his position as the student council president that gave him that power. Horikita Manabu also carried a powerful aura. His presence dominated the whole gym.

“Also, we, the student council, are not looking for anyone that has a naive way of thinking. Not only will that kind of person fail to get elected, they will inevitably become a stain to this school. The student council is only responsible for regulating the students, but the school expects much more. Those of you that understand can become potential candidates.”

After that unwavering speech, he walked off the stage and exited the building.

Because no one dared to speak, none of the students spoke up when he left the gym. The students didn’t know what would happen if they tried to talk. Everyone felt that way.

“Everyone, thank you for coming. With that, the club fair is over. We will now open the reception area for anyone interested in joining. The reception area will only be open until the end of April, so anyone interested after then can bring applications directly to the club.”

With the help of the chairman, the tense atmosphere slowly disappeared.

Afterwards, the club representatives opened the reception area.

“...”

Horikita still didn’t move at all.

“Oi, what’s wrong?”

Horikita didn’t answer. My words didn’t reach her.

“Oh, Ayanokouji-kun. You also came?”

A thoughtful voice called out. It’s Sudou. My classmates Ike and Yamauchi

were with him.

“What is this, three people? Seems like you guys are getting along.”

Feeling jealous, I called out to Sudou.

“Are you also thinking of joining a club?”

“No, I was just looking. Does that mean you were thinking of joining a club then?”

“Yea. I’ve been playing basketball since elementary school. I think I’ll continue here too.”

I always thought he did some kind of exercise with that kind of body—guess it was basketball.

“How about you two?”

“We just came because it seemed fun and exciting. I also hoped some kind of fateful encounter would happen.”

“The hell, what do you mean by a fateful encounter?”

I prompted Ike again after hearing that questionable goal, and he answered proudly after crossing his arms.

“My first objective is to make a girlfriend. So, I was hoping that a fateful encounter would happen here.”



So it was that kind of thing. Having a girlfriends seems to be an essential part of Ike's ideal school life.

"Also, that student council president has a strong aura. As if he ruled the place."

"Right? He was able to silence everyone."

"Yea, yea. Also, I made a male group chat yesterday." (T/N The conversation here jumps all over the place; it's pretty weird.) Ike took out his phone.

"Do you want to join too? It's pretty convenient."

"Eh, is that fine?"

"Of course. We're all a part of class D after all."

I didn't expect that. I'm glad to have been invited to a group chat.

A perfect chance to make friends finally came!

As I started to take out my phone to exchange numbers, I saw Horikita disappear into the crowd.

Feeling worried about her, I unintentionally stopped moving.

"What's wrong?"

"No... it's nothing. Let's exchange numbers."

Regaining my senses, I shared my contact info with the others.

Horikita has the freedom to do whatever and go wherever she wants, and I have no right to stop her.

I felt like following her for a moment, but I decided not to.

Chapter 3: Ladies and gentlemen, thanks for waiting!

“Good morning Yamauchi!”

“Good morning Ike!”

While arriving at school, Ike called out to Yamauchi with a smile on his face.

It’s unusual for those two to get to school early. One week since the entrance ceremony. Ike and Yamauchi have always arrived at school right before the bell.

“Wow~ the lesson is so fun that I can’t sleep~”

“Yup, this school’s the best—swimming will start soon! I say swimming, but girls are the important part! And by girls I mean their swimsuits!”

Certainly, swimming is taught to both boys and girls. In other words, Horikita, Kushida, and all the other girls are wearing swimsuits... and their skin becomes visible. The girls in the room backed away from Ike and Yamauchi’s excitement.

On the other hand, I was still sitting in my chair, all alone. I have to be proactive in joining a group of friends. Fortunately, their conversation was paused, so I stood up. However...

“Oi, Doctor. Come over here.”

“Fufu, did you call him?”

A chubby boy, who apparently has the nickname “Doctor”, walked towards the ones that called him. I think his name was Sotomura or something.

“Doctor, can you record the girls wearing swimsuits?”

“Leave it to me. I’ll pretend to be sick and skip class to observe them.”

“Record? What are you planning to do?”

“Doctor’s going to rank the sizes of the girl’s boobs. If there’s a chance, he’ll try to take a picture.”

“... Oi oi.”

Sudou also draws back from Ike's plan. If the girls find out it'll be a bloodbath. However, regardless of what they're talking about, I'm envious of their conversation. Must be good to have friends. I want friends too.

"Sad."

"...You were here too, Horikita?"

"A few minutes ago. I walked in while you were looking at those boys. You wouldn't be thinking of trying to be friends with them, would you?"

"Shut up. It's difficult for me to make friends anyway."

"The way I see it, you don't seem to have a communication disorder."

"I have a lot of circumstances. Ha... even now I can only hold a conversation with you."

Even if I can text with Ike and the others, conversation is still hard.

"Hey... I already told you to not include me in your list of friends, right?"

She looked at me with a disgusted face as she took a few steps back.

"It's ok. No matter how low I go, I'd never become friends with you."

"I see. I feel relieved."

How much does she hate having friends?

"Oi Ayanokouji."

Suddenly, Ike called out to me. When I looked up, I saw his smiling face beckoning me over.

"What, what is it."

I slightly stammered as I got up. Horikita already turned her attention to other things.

Anyways, my chance to make a group of friends has come. I walked towards Ike.

"To tell you the truth, we were going to bet on the girl's chest sizes."

"We even have a table for the betting odds."

Doctor took out a tablet and opened an Excel sheet.

All the names of the girls in the class were listed. Bets were also attached. I'm not interested in betting, but I won't let this chance to make friends get away.

"Hmm... Should I join?"

"Yea! Do it, do it!"

Right now, the contender for the biggest breasts on the sheet is Hasebe. Her odds are 1 for 8. (T/N 1 for 8 or 1 to 8? don't know) It's a name I haven't heard before. I haven't memorized the names of my classmates. This is pretty bad.

"This is more detailed than I thought it would be... aren't you guys observing too much?"

"That's because we're male. We've only got ass and tits constantly in our minds!"

Even if that's true, they have no restraint at all.

Near the bottom of the odds, there was Horikita's name. It was about 30th.

Well, in terms of breast size, it's obvious who wins and who loses. She has a pretty low chance of winning.

"So, what are you going to do? It's 1,000 points to join."

"I see..."

Without knowing anyone's names and faces, let alone their breast sizes, it's hard to join.

The only people I hear about, after all, are Horikita and Kushida.

Kushida certainly has big breasts, but it's hard to say that she'd take first place with only that much information.

"It's fine, we're only playing. There's a lot of people to pick from too."

"I'll do it!" "Me too me too!" "I've scouted boob sizes before too!"

While I was thinking about it, the boys all gathered and got excited over breasts. All the girls in the classroom looked over with disgusted expressions.

"I'll join too. My bet's on Sakura."

Yamauchi cut in and gave his bet. Sakura is an ordinary girl who wore glasses. I don't really talk to anyone, so I wouldn't really know.

Pondering about something, Yamauchi took Ike and Doctor's shoulders and started whispering something.

"I'm only saying this to you guys, but I actually confessed to Sakura."

"Ha!? What, really!?"

Ike was the most surprised and impatient. Did someone beat him to achieving his goal?

"Yea, yea. But this is only between us, ok? I thought she was really ordinary at first. And then I saw her clothes. Those things are huge."

"Stupid, you're asking her because she's big and not because she's cute?"

"I wouldn't date anyone unless they're at the same level as Kushida and Hasebe. I don't have any interest in ordinary girls."

Yamauchi was being merciless because no one else was around.

I wonder how much I can trust his words about asking her out.

In the end, I decided to place my bet on the girls with higher odds.

1

"Wow, it's the pool!"

After lunch ended, the long-awaited swimming class Ike and the others were waiting for finally came.

Without trying to hide his lust, Ike stood up in excitement. The group faced the indoor swimming pool I also followed stealthily from the back. Or so I thought.

"Let's go together, Ayanokouji."

"Eh? Uh, s-sure."

I hesitated from Ike's invitation, but I quickly followed them to the locker rooms.

Sudou quickly started changing his clothes. His well-forged body from years of playing basketball was visible. Especially if you compared him to the others in the class, his body looks strong.

The students wrapped themselves with bath towels, but Sudou stood there in only his underwear. In that semi-nude state, he took out his swimsuit from his bag. I unintentionally spoke up at the sight.

“Sudou, don’t you feel embarrassed?”

“No, I try to change as quickly as possible. If you try to hide yourself, you become the center of attention.”

You can say that again. Someone who tries to change stealthily in a locker room would probably be made fun of.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Sudou left the locker rooms. I also finished changing.

“This school’s really the best! It’s even better than a city pool!” (T/N I guess it’s something like a pool club?)

Ike, who came out wearing swimming trunks, shouted after seeing the 50 meter pool.

The water looked crystal-clear, and wasn’t disturbed because it was an indoor pool. What an excellent facility.

“Where are the girls? Are they not here yet?”

Ike looked for the girls, sniffing the air like a dog.

“They take a while to change after all.”

“Hey, what would happen if I suddenly jumped into the girl’s locker room?”

“They’d beat you up and file charges against you.”

“... Don’t ruin my fantasies with such a real answer.”

He was shivering at that reply.

“If you stare at the girl’s swimsuits too much, they’ll probably hate you.”

“Are there any boys that wouldn’t stare!? ... What will I do if I get a boner...”

If that happened, Ike would probably be hated until we graduate.

Wait, what? I'm somehow naturally talking to Ike and his group.

Even though I didn't want to and couldn't join his group, it looks like I was pulled into the group. This must be the moment that I finally make some friends.

"Wow~ This pool doesn't even compare to my middle school one~"

A few minutes after the boys finished changing, a girl's voice could be heard.

"Did, did they finally come!?"

Ike was on guard, waiting. If you're that obvious, it's obvious they'd hate you.

Even so, I was also a bit curious. About Hasebe, Kushida, and more or less, about Horikita too.

I was particularly interested in Hasebe—there's nothing wrong with taking one peek at her.

However, everyone's expectations were betrayed by an unexpected turn of events.

"Hasebe's not here! What, what is this!? Doctor!"

Doctor, who was flustered, looked all around from the observation deck on the second floor.

Ike and co. also looked around, expecting the girls to come out at any time.

Even so—. They were nowhere to be found.

Doctor looked left and right in disbelief. Is she still changing? Or...

"Doctor, b-behind you!"

"W-w-w-w-what!?"

Ike pointed his finger with a shout, clearly having noticed something. Hasebe was also on the observation deck next to Doctor.

One by one, all the girls appeared on the second floor. Sakura's also up there.

"What, what is this... What is this situation!?"

Ike buried his face in his hands and collapsed on the spot from the unbelievable turn of events.

Hasebe seems like a self-conscious girl. Furthermore, she's sensitive to the curiosity from the boys. I guess she wasn't amused by the boy's peeking.

"I thought I would get to see big breasts~!"

Contemplating suicide, Ike shouted in agony in earshot of Hasebe.

Murmurs spread among the girls. Like I said, I expected the girls to hate him for being so blatant...

"Ike, this isn't a time to be sad. There are a lot of other girls!"

"Y-yeah. Anyone's fine. This isn't a time to feel down!"

"Yeah!"

Yamauchi and Ike affirmed their friendship and clasped each other's hands.

"You two, what are you doing? Looks fun."

"Ku-ku-kushida-chan?"

Kushida interrupted the two boys.

Wearing the school swimsuit, Kushida's curvy body line was on display.

In less than a second, all the boys stared at Kushida. Her breasts are about D or E cup. I don't know exactly but it's around that size. It's also a lot bigger than I thought. Her butt was also much bigger than expected. However, I immediately averted my eyes.

Ah, the weather's really good today... World peace is great.

... It's a big trouble when a certain body part reacts.

"Why do you have a weird expression?"

Horikita looked at my face, feeling suspicious.

"I'm currently having an internal battle."

I saw Horikita's figure. Not a bad view, yup, not a bad view.

I was staring too long, so I tried to calm myself down and exert self-control.

“...”

For some reason, Horikita looked up and down my body.

“Ayanokouji-kun, do you exercise?”

“Eh? No, not particularly. I’m not proud of it, but I was part of the go-home club.”

“You say that, but... you clearly look like you exercise from your the muscles in your arm and back.”

“Maybe I inherited good genes?”

“I don’t think that’s the case.”

“What, do you have a muscle fetish? Is that true? Can you bet your life on that?”

“If you go that far to deny it, I’ll believe you...”

She looks dissatisfied. Looks like she has quite the discerning eye.



"Horikita-san, are you good at swimming?"

Even though Horikita had a strange expression on her face, she quietly replied

to Kushida.

“I’m not particularly good or bad.”

“In middle school, I was really bad at swimming. I practiced really hard, and now I’m a lot better!”

“I see.”

Horikita let out an uninterested reply and backed away from Kushida. She stopped the conversation from going any further.

“Alright, everyone gather—”

A teacher brought the students together and started class. He may be the P.E. teacher, but he looks like the type that would attract girls.

“16 people, I see. I expected more people, but I guess it works.”

There clearly were students skipping class, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“It’s a bit sudden, but I’ll be examining your abilities after you’re done warming up. You guys will be swimming.”

“Um sensei, I can’t swim though...”

A boy raised his hand apologetically and spoke up.

“As the teacher, I’ll make sure that you learn how to swim by the summer. Don’t worry.”

“There’s no need to learn how to swim... We can’t go to the beach anyway.”

“That’s too bad. It doesn’t matter if you’re bad at swimming now, but I’ll make sure everyone learns. Learning how to swim will definitely be useful. I guarantee it.”

Learning how to swim will be useful? Well, I guess swimming will be useful one way or another.

Even so, when the teacher says it like that, I feel a bit uncomfortable.

Eh, he probably feels the obligation to cure the hopeless swimmers.

Everyone started the warm-up exercises. Ike kept repeatedly glancing at the girls to take a peak. Afterwards, we were instructed to start the 50m swim.

Students who didn't know how to swim were allowed to touch the bottom of the pool with their feet.

Ever since last summer, I haven't been in a pool since. I stepped into the pool, getting quickly accustomed to the temperature-regulated pool. Then I started to swim lightly.

After swimming the 50m, I waited for everyone else to finish up.

"Hehehe, a complete victory. Did you see? My super swimming!"

Swimming casually, Ike got out of the pool with a self-satisfied look. No, you weren't all that different from the others.

"Anyway, it looks like mostly everyone can swim."

"Sorry, Sensei. Back in middle school I was called the Flying Fish after all."

"I see. Then you guys can immediately start competing against each other then. 50m freestyle, separate yourselves by gender."

"C-compete!? Are you serious?"

"I'll give the first place winner a bonus: 5,000 points. On the other hand, last place will get supplementary lessons so prepare yourselves."

Those who were good at swimming were cheering, while the worse swimmers weren't thrilled at all.

"Because there aren't too many girls, I'll split you guys into two groups of 5 and give the fastest time the overall victory. For the boys, I'll take the top 5 times and then hold a final round."

I didn't expect the school to give points as prizes. Perhaps it's to punish the students who skipped class. What a well-thought-out plan.

There were 16 boys and 10 girls, excluding those who didn't know how to swim. When the girls started their race, the boys sat on the sidelines and started to cheer for... no, evaluate the girls.

"Kushida-chan Kushida-chan Kushida-chan Kushida-chan Kushida-chan. Hahahaha."

It seems like Kushida completely captured Ike's mind.

“You’re scary, Ike—quiet down.”

“B-but Kushida-chan is fucking cute. Her breasts are really big too.”

Kushida garnered popularity from the boys in a whirlwind. Is there anyone as popular as she is right now?

If you only talked about faces, Horikita was definitely on top, but her bad personality dropped her popularity down. However, she has a fair bit of popularity, so when she stood at the start line, there were a few cheers.

“Everyone, make sure to remember this sight! Today’s fap material has been secured!”

“Yea!”

Somehow, the boys were getting closer to each other through swimming.

Hirata was the only exception, having averted his eyes from the girls.

The whistle blew, and the 5 girls jumped in. Horikita is in lane 2. Taking the lead in the beginning, she maintained her lead at a distance. She confidently came in first place.

“Oh! Horikita did it!”

Her time was about 28 seconds. That’s pretty quick. Without even breathing heavily, Horikita slowly got out of the pool.

The boys were staring at her bouncing ass as she got out of the pool. I also unintentionally looked at Horikita. Because she’s a girl, there’s something there. Yea.

Then came the second race. Kushida was in lane 4. The boys were waving and cheering with smiles on their faces.

“Woooooooooo!”

They’re some aggressive boys. Some of them even tried to look in between the girls’ legs.

During the self-introductions, Kushida declared to the whole class that she wanted get along with everybody. It seems like her wish came true. She was constantly having friendly chats with all the boys around her. Kushida has an

atmosphere that attracts other people to her.

The second race started. It was pretty one-sided. The girl known as Onodera won the race in a landslide. Her time of 26 seconds was clearly the best time. Kushida got a time of 31 seconds, which was pretty good but only got her 4th place.

I went to go talk to Horikita who had gotten out of the pool.

"That's too bad. Second place. Those swim club members look relentless."

"Not really. I don't mind whether or not I lose. Do you have confidence in yourself?"

"Obviously. I just don't have to be last."

"... That's not something you should be proud of. And I thought boys would care more about winning and losing."

"I don't really like to compete with others. After all, I avoid trouble."

I already gave up on trying to get 1st place. My only goal is to avoid the supplementary lessons.

I was put in lane 2, while Sudou was in the first lane. Matching Sudou's pace was impossible, so I didn't even try to. I aimed to stay in the middle so I wasn't last place. Keeping that in mind, I dived into the pool.

Finishing the 50m stretch with great speed, Sudou looked up from the water. The boys and girls let out a voice of admiration.

"Is that even possible, Sudou? You finished in 25 seconds."

I only got 36 seconds. About 10th place. Great, I don't have to take supplementary lessons then.

"Sudou, won't you join the swimming club? If you practiced, you'd compete pretty well."

"I plan on just playing basketball. Swimming's just for fun."

Not even breaking a sweat from that small amount of swimming, Sudou calmly got out of the pool.

"Ah, Sudou certainly has good reflexes."

Ike elbowed Sudou, feeling jealous.

"Kya—!"

A girl let out a scream (of joy).

Hirata was on the start line.

While Sudou's body gathered the admiration of the boys, Hirata's body gathered the admiration of the girls. Hirata is slender but still well-built. You can call him a slender macho man. Hearing the cheering from the girls for Hirata, Ike made a spitting gesture. Sudou also made a displeased face and glared at Hirata. (T/N apparently "slender macho" is actually a term?) "If you win, I'll make sure to destroy you. I'll show you my full power."

Wasn't swimming just for fun...

When the teacher blew the whistle, Hirata jumped in with great form. As Hirata paddled his arms, the girls on the side were cheering him on. His swimming form looks uselessly cool.

"He's surprisingly fast."

Sudou calmly commented. Anyway, Hirata is a pretty fast swimmer. The other 4 boys were quite a distance from Hirata. His lead incited the girls to cheer him on even more.

Hirata took 1st place, exceeding my expectations. The loud cheers reverberated in the big indoor pool.

"Sensei, what was the time?"

Ike impatiently asked.

"Hirata's time is... 26.13 seconds."

"Alright, let's go Sudou. If it's you, you can win! Bring down the hammer of justice!"

"Leave it to me. I'll beat him thoroughly then make his popularity drop to the ground..."

Sudou got fired up from Ike's words, but a loss from Hirata probably wouldn't

cause his popularity to drop.

“Hirata-kun, you were really cool! You’re not just good at soccer, but also good at swimming!”

“Is that so? Thanks.”

“Hey, why are you looking at Hirata-kun with love in your eyes!”

“Ha? You’re the one ogling him!?”

“Ki—!”

And so on. Hirata’s popularity exceeded frustration and is a shocking thing to watch.

“Stop, you guys. Don’t fight over me. I belong to everyone. I want to get along with everyone. Just because I’m good at swimming doesn’t mean you should fight over me.”

I don’t know what he was hearing, but Koenji mistook those cheers for himself.

With a refreshing smile, Koenji put his foot on the start line.

“Hey... Why is Koenji wearing those speedos...”

“W-what?”

Wearing speedos were allowed by the school, but no one else were wearing those. The girls looked away from Koenji’s crotch area.

However, for the third race, Koenji was the center of attention. His posture at the start looked like an athlete’s.

Not only his posture, but Koenji’s figure is even better than Sudou’s. The boys who were proud about their physicality, including Sudou, watched Koenji swim while gulping.

“I don’t really care about winning or losing, but I don’t like losing.”

Sudou muttered to himself. At the sound of the whistle, Koenji jumped into the pool with great form.

“Wow!”

Sudou let out a surprised voice at Koenji's aggressive swimming. Hirata was also looking in amazement. His speed is really impressive. Of course, Sudou is also fast. Recording the time, the teacher looked at the stopwatch once again.

"Time is... 23.22 seconds."

"As usual, my abdominal, back, and psoas major muscle are in shape. Not bad." (T/N he actually uses the anatomical term for psoas major muscle) After getting out of the pool, Koenji smiled and brushed his hair.

Still breathing evenly, it doesn't even look like he swam.

"I'm fired up...!"

His fighting spirit burned after his time was beaten. To be honest, only Sudou has any chance at winner other than Koenji. Rather than the finals, this is more like a one-on-one between Sudou and Koenji.

"Because both Koenji-kun and Sudou-kun are fast, I'm looking forward to the finals.

"Ah, yea."

While waiting for the finals to start, Kushida spoke up.

Because a bishoujo in a swimsuit was next to me, I entered a state of emergency as my heart went doki.

"Hmm? What is it? Your face is a bit red... By any chance, are you feeling sick?"

"No, it's nothing like that..."

"Even so, something looks off... Why do we have swimming classes in April anyway?"

"That's because we have a great indoor pool. That reminds me, Kushida, you were really fast. To the point that it's impossible to imagine you being bad in middle school."

"You too, Ayanokouji—you were pretty fast."

"No, I'm just normal. I also don't like exercising much."

"Is that so? But Ayanokouji-kun looks pretty solid. Even though you're thin,

you look as well-built as Sudou.”

Kushida looked at me in surprise. I feel 10 times more nervous than when Horikita looked at me.

“There’s no special reason; I was just born with it. That’s the truth.”

The conversation revolved around my physical health. Even though I’m nervous, I feel oddly satisfied. It was only for a short while this time, but I want to talk with Kushida alone.

“Wow, Koenji’s fast. I thought it would be Sudou’s victory, but... what is this, Ayanokouji!”

It looks like Koenji beat Sudou by about 5 meters for the victory. The commentating Ike suddenly turned to me with a face of a demon.

“What, why me? I didn’t do anything.”

“That’s not it!”

He whispered to me while putting his arm over my shoulders.

“I’m aiming for Kushida-chan, so don’t get in the way.”

I’m not trying to get in the way, but there are things in the world that are possible and things that aren’t. I don’t think Kushida is the type of girl to go for someone like Ike.

Of course, she wouldn’t go for me either.

Chapter 4: Friend

“Kikyou-chan, do you want to stop by a cafe on the way home?”

“Un, let’s go! Ah, but wait a bit. I want to ask one more person.”

After inviting one of her female friends, Kushida walked towards Horikita while putting a book in her bag.

“Horikita-san. I’m going to the cafe with my friend—if you’d like, would you like to join?”

“I’m not interested.”

Horikita swiftly cut down Kushida’s invitation with a few words.

Can’t you just lie that you’re planning on shopping or that you’re meeting with someone else? Horikita bluntly rejected her invitation. However, Kushida was still smiling.

This sight wasn’t anything new. Ever since the entrance ceremony, Kushida has periodically tried to invite Horikita. I thought it would be fine for Horikita to accept once in awhile, but that might be the perspective of a bystander. Nevertheless, no one has been able to invite Horikita successfully. .

“Is that so.... Well, I’ll invite you some other time.”

“Wait a second, Kushida-san.”

For some reason, Horikita called out Kushida. By any chance, did she give into Kushida’s invitation?

“Please don’t invite me again. It’s a bother.”

She said with a cold tone.

However, Kushida wasn’t affected and continued to smile.

“I’ll invite you some other time.”

Kushida ran back to her friends, and they exited the hallway.

“Kikyou-chan, please stop inviting Horikita-san. I hate her—” (T/N Not sure

if this is a mistake on the author's part—pretty sure I didn't mistranslate here. Names are hard to mistranslate.) As the door was closing, the girl's voices could be faintly heard.

The words should have been heard by the nearby Horikita, but there was no indication that she heard them.

"You don't say unnecessary things like that, do you?"

"Yea. I understand you well enough. It's pointless."

"That's good."

Horikita, who finished packing up, walked out of the classroom at her own pace.

I was lingering around the classroom for a bit, but I got bored and stood up from my seat. Time to go home.

"Ayanokouji-kun, do you have time?"

I ran into Hirata, who was still at school. In a small voice, I replied to Hirata. It's strange to see Hirata speak up to someone first.

"It's about Horikita—I was wondering if something is wrong. The girls were talking about her earlier. She's always alone, after all."

Rejecting Kushida's invitations, she was always alone.

"Can't you tell her to get along with the others more?"

"Isn't that up to the person themselves? Also, she's not troubling anyone else."

"Of course I understand. However, there are also other people that are worried. I don't want any problems about bullying to arise in the class."

Bullying? He did talk to me out of the blue, but with those words, it sounds like a bad omen. So were you warning me? Hirata was looking at me with pure intentions.

"I think it's better for you to say it directly to her, rather than saying it through me."

"... Yea, I guess. Sorry for saying something strange."

Horikita is always alone every day. If that continues, in a month, she'll probably become the tumor of the class.

However, since this is Horikita's own personal problem, it's not something I should involve myself with.

1

After leaving school, I headed straight for the dorms. Kushida, who left earlier with a friend, was waiting for someone while leaning against the wall. Noticing me, she looked at me with a smile on her face.

"That's good. I was waiting for Ayanokouji-kun. I have something to talk about. Do you have time?"

"Yea, I have nothing else to do..."

By any chance, is it a confession... ? No, there's a 1 percent chance of that happening.

"I'll ask you frankly. Ayanokouji-kun, have you ever seen Horikita smile even once?"

"Eh? No... I don't remember."

It seems like Kushida approached me to talk about Horikita. Also, when I think back, I've never seen Horikita smile. Gripping my hand, she closed the gap between us. Is that the smell of flowers? The pleasant smell entered my nose.

"You know... I want to become friends with Horikita-san."

"Your feelings are reaching her. At first a lot of people were trying to talk to her, but now you're the only one left."

"Ayanokouji-kun, you seem to know Horikita-san pretty well."

"Of course you would get to know someone sitting next to you every day."

Girls being girls, they were really eager to make groups from the first day of school. They are even more conscious of factions and groups than men are, and about 4 people held all the "power" among 20 people. The girls say they are just getting to know a lot of people.

However, the only exceptions to this rule is Kushida. All the groups have a lot of people, but only Kushida is starting to get massively popular. Without ever giving up, she kept trying to become friends with Horikita. It's not something any ordinary student can do. That's probably why she's popular.

Also, she's cute.

After all, cuteness correlates to popularity.

"Weren't you rejected by Horikita? I don't think whatever you tell her will make her understand."

I know that she's not the type to mince her words. If you talk to her carelessly, she would probably pour insults onto you. Honestly, I don't want to see Kushida get hurt.

"Won't you... help me?"

"Well..."

I didn't reply immediately. Usually, if I was asked to help by a cute girl, I would agree without hesitation. However, since I like to avoid trouble, I couldn't say yes immediately. That's because I don't want to see Horikita verbally hurt Kushida. I'll refuse her gently.

"I understand your feelings, but..."

"Is it no good... ?"

Cute + request + upturned eyes = fatal.

"... Well, it can't be helped. Only this time, ok?"

"Really!? Ayanokouji-kun, thank you!"

After I agreed to help her, Kushida had a delighted smile on her face.

... Cute. Because I said that I would help, I can't be rash and do something crazy.

"So, what exactly are we doing? Even if you say you want to be friends with her, it's not that simple."

For someone like me who doesn't have any friends, it's a difficult problem I can't answer easily.

“Hmm... First step is to make Horikita smile.”

“Make her smile, huh.”

Making her smile requires the right mood and atmosphere for us to succeed.

That kind of relationship might be called “friendship”.

Luckily, though, Kushida seems to know how to make people smile.

“Do you have any ideas on how to make her smile?”

“Um... I thought that we could think about it together.”

With an apologetic “Teehee”, she lightly tapped her head.

If it was an ugly woman I would've immediately hit her, but it was fine because it was Kushida.

“Smile...”

Somehow, because Kushida asked me to help, my goal now is to make Horikita smile. Is that goal even possible? Very questionable.

“Anyway, after school, I will try to invite Horikita. When I return to the dorms, I probably won't have any arms or legs left. Is there any place I should invite her to?”

“Hmm, how about Pallet? I go to Pallet often, so she might have overheard us talking about it.”

Pallet is probably the 1st or 2nd most popular cafe on campus.

Certainly, I often hear about Pallet whenever Kushida and her friends go after school.

If I hear about it often, Horikita would have also unconsciously learned about it.

“Do you think it would work if you two went into Pallet, ordered, then ‘unexpectedly’ ran into me?”

“No... I think that's a bit too simple. What if your friends also helped?”

The second Horikita notices Kushida, she would probably go home immediately. If possible, it would be better to create a situation where it's

difficult to get up. I told Kushida the idea I just thought of.

“Oh~ That certainly sounds like it would work! Ayanokouji-kun, you’re smart!”

Kushida listened to me with sparkling eyes while nodding her head and saying “Un, un”.

“I don’t think that has anything to do with my intelligence... Anyway, that’s the plan.”

“Ok, I expect a lot, Ayanokouji-kun!”

No, I’m troubled by your expectations.

“If Kushida invited Horikita, she would probably reject you, so should I invite her?”

“Alright. After all, I think Horikita-san trusts you.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Hmm, well, it looks like she does? At the very least, she trusts you more than anyone else in the class.”

That doesn’t mean that I’m the most appropriate person for the task...

“That’s because I met her by coincidence.”

I met her on the bus by chance, and I sat next to her by chance.

If either one of those didn’t happen, I probably wouldn’t talk to Horikita at all.

“Don’t you meet every new person by chance? Then they become your friend, your best friend... and sometimes your lover and family.”

“... I see.”

I guess that’s one way to look at it. Talking to Kushida was also a result of a coincidence.

In other words, Kushida and I might be in a relationship before long.

2

It was after school. All the students went off on their own fun after-school life

as they talked about where to go. I looked at Kushida and signaled that I was starting the plan.

Horikita, the target, had started her usual routine of getting ready to go home.

"Hey, Horikita. Are you free right now?"

"I don't have any time to spare. I have to go back to the dorms and prepare for tomorrow."

Prepare for tomorrow? I'm pretty sure she only has school to prepare for...

"I want you to go somewhere with me, though."

"... What are you trying to do?"

"Do you think I'm inviting you with a particular goal in mind?"

"If you invite out of the blue, it's natural that I would doubt you. However, if there's something concrete you need to talk about, I wouldn't mind listening."

Of course, there's no such thing.

"You know how there's a cafe on campus? There are too many girls, so I don't have the courage to go in myself. It feels like boys are being excluded."

"Certainly the proportion of girls is high, but can't boys go in too?"

"Yea, but no boy goes in alone. They always go in with other girls. Only those kind of boys go to the cafe."

Horikita tried to recall information about Pallet as she pondered over it.

"That does sound correct. It's unusual for Ayanokouji-kun to have a reasonable opinion."

"But I'm still interested in the place. So I thought I would to invite you to come with me."

"Naturally, since... you have no one else to invite, right?"

"That's a rude way to put it, but yea."

"And if I refused?"

"Then that's that. I have no choice but to give up. I can't force you to give up

your private time, after all.”

“... Understood. What you said seems to be true. I can’t spend too much time, though. Is that fine?”

“Yea. I won’t be there long.”

I added “probably” in my mind. If she knew that Kushida was involved, Horikita would probably reproach me.

Because I can talk to Kushida and was able to invite Horikita, I started to think that I probably could’ve become friends with Horikita by myself.

After all, whether it was the club for or the cafe, Horikita went with me, despite complaining all the time. It’s a miracle considering I find it hard to make friends.

After leaving together, we finally arrived at the cafe, Pallet, on the first floor of the school building.

Girls started gathering one by one to have fun after school.

“Looks very crowded.”

“Is this your first time here after school too? Oh, right. You’re always alone.”

“Was that meant to be sarcasm? Childish.”

It was only a joke, but as usual, Horikita verbally insulted me.

After ordering, we got our drinks. I ordered pancakes.

“Do you like sweet foods?”

“I just wanted to eat pancakes.”

I didn’t particularly like or dislike them, but I just made up a plausible reason.

“There aren’t any seats...”

“I guess we’ll have to wait a bit. Oh, nevermind, there are seats over there.”

Having noticed two girls get up from their seats, I quickly secured the table. I let Horikita pass to the far side of the table. Putting my bag down on the ground, I sat down and looked around casually.

“Hey, I just realized. If someone looked at us from afar, we would look like a

couple... not."

Horikita's face was expressionless and frigid like always. Feeling nervous from the crowded surroundings, my stomach started to hurt.

I overheard the two girls next to us say "Let's go" while holding drinks in their hands.

And immediately after, another person sat right down. It was Kushida.

"Ah, Horikita-san. What a coincidence! Ayanokouji-kun too!"

"... Yea."

Pretending that we met by chance, Kushida greeted us. Horikita looked at Kushida with narrowed eyes, then turned to me. Of course, this was something we had planned out earlier. We reserved two tables with four of Kushida's friends, and then when Horikita and I arrived at Pallet, I signaled them to make spots for the two of us. After a while, the other two would leave so that Kushida could come by.

As a result, our meeting looked like a coincidence.

"Did Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san come with each other?"

"By chance, yea. Did you come alone?"

"Yea, today I—"

"I'm going home."

"O-oi, we just got here."

"You don't need me because Kushida-san's here, right?"

"No, you're not a problem. Kushida and I are only classmates, after all."

"You and I are also only 'classmates'. In addition..."

She looked at me and Kushida with a cold look.

"I don't like this. What are you planning?"

Looks like she saw through our plan.

"N-no, it's only a coincidence!"

If it was possible, I didn't want this outcome to happen.

The correct course of action would have been to make a small shrug and say, "What do you mean?"

"When we were sitting down, the two girls before us were from class D. And then, the two next to us were also from class D. Is that only a coincidence?"

"Wow, you noticed that—I didn't notice at all."

"Also, we came straight over here as soon as it was after school. No matter how quickly the other girls rushed over here, they might've been here maybe 1, 2 minutes at the most. It's a bit too early to be returning home. Am I wrong?"

Horikita is a much more observant person than I thought.

Not only did she remember her classmate's faces, she understood what was happening nearly instantly.

"Um..."

Feeling bewildered, Kushida looked at me for help.

Horikita noticed her look at me. The gig was up.

"Sorry Horikita. We arranged this."

"I thought so. The situation made me think something was suspicious."

"Horikita-san. Please be my friend!"

No longer trying to hide anything, Kushida asked her directly.

"I've already said it many times, but leave me alone. I have no intention of becoming a bother to the class. Is that not allowed?"

"... Always spending time by yourself will lead to a lonely and sad school life. I want to get along with everyone in the class."

"I'm not trying to deny your wishes. However, it's wrong to involve other people against their will. I don't feel sad from being alone."

"B-but..."

"Also, for argument's sake, do you think I would be happy if you forced me to get along with you? Do you think any friendships or trust will come from a

forced relationship?"

Horikita's words aren't wrong. It's not that she doesn't want to make friends, it's that she feels they are unnecessary. Kushida thinks one way, but Horikita thinks another way.

"This time, it was my fault for not clearly telling you. So I will not blame you. However, if you try again, I will not forgive you next time."

She grabbed her untouched cafe latte and stood up.

"I want to get along with Horikita-san by any means. When I first saw you, it didn't feel like it was our first time meeting—I think that Horikita-san felt the same way."

"This is a waste of time. You're making me feel uncomfortable."

Horikita interrupted her while raising her voice. Kushida involuntarily gulped.

Even though I agreed to help Kushida, I had no intention of interfering. However— "It's not like I can't understand Horikita's way of thinking. I've also questioned whether or not friends are necessary on multiple occasions now."

"You're saying that? You've wanted friends ever since the first day of school."

"I'm not denying that. However, I'm the same type of person you are. At least until I graduated middle school. I've never been able to make friends until I entered this school. I've never known anyone's contact address, nor have I played with anyone after school. I was completely alone."

Kushida was surprised when I said those words.

"I think that's why I started talking to you a lot."

"That's new. However, even if we have something in common, everything that comes after is different. You didn't make friends even if you wanted friends. I didn't make friends because they're unnecessary. To say we're similar is incorrect. Am I wrong?"

"... Maybe. But telling Kushida that she's uncomfortable is going too far. Are you really ok with that? Saying that you won't get along with anyone now means that you'll be alone for the next 3 years. That's a lot of loneliness in the future."

"I'm fine because it'll be my 9th year in a row. Ah, if you include kindergarten it's even longer."

Did she just casually drop something heavy? Does she stay by herself all the time because she's been alone for as long as she can remember?

"Can I go home now?

Horikita let out a deep sigh and looked straight into Kushida's eyes.

"Kushida-san, if you won't be convinced, I won't say anything. Promise me. Since you're not stupid, you know what I'm saying, right?"

Horikita left the store with a "Well then". She left me and Kushida behind in the busy cafe.

"That was a failure. I tried to help but it was no use. She got too used to being alone."

Kushida, who couldn't say anything, sat down with a thump. However, she immediately recovered with her usual smiling face.

"No, thank you Ayanokouji-kun. I wasn't able to become friends with her, but... I got to learn something important. I'm satisfied with that. Sorry, Horikita-san might hate you because you helped me."

"Don't worry about it. I also wanted Horikita to know about the benefits of having friends."

Because we were holding up four seats by the two of us, I moved over to Kushida's table.

"Even so, I was surprised. When you said you didn't have friends. Is that true? It didn't seem that way at all. Why were you alone?"

"Hmm? Oh, that's true. Sudou, Ike and co. are the first friends I made. I don't know whether it was my fault or just the environment I grew up in."

"Are you happy that you made friends? Is it fun?"

"Yea. It's annoying at times, but it's also really fun."

Kushida's eyes were sparkling as she nodded her head while saying "Un, un"

"Horikita has a thought and purpose to her way of thinking. There's nothing

we can do about it.”

“Is that so? Is it impossible for her to make friends?”

“Why are you so desperate? Don’t you already have a lot of friends? There’s no reason to obsess over Horikita.”

Even though she wasn’t able to get along with absolutely everyone in the class, it doesn’t mean she should desperately try to become friends with Horikita.

“I wanted to be friends with everybody... It’s not only class D, but with all the other classes too. However, if I can’t get along with one girl in the class, then I’ve already failed...”

“Just think of Horikita as being special. And then wait for a true coincidence to happen.”

Not something forced, but a real coincidence.

When that happens, becoming friends might become a possibility.

Chapter 5: The end of my ordinary days

“Hahahahaha! You’re too funny, stupid!”

During 2nd period math class, Ike was loudly chatting with Yamauchi. It had been three weeks since the entrance ceremony; in that time, those two, along with Sudou, were given the name “the stupid trio”.

“Ne ne, do you want to go sing some karaoke?” “Yea, let’s go—”

Nearby, a group of girls were making after school plans.

“Even though people were nervous for a while, it seems like everyone’s opened up to each other quickly...”

“Ayanokouji-kun, haven’t you also made more friends?”

Horikita asked me while she was writing down notes from the blackboard.

“Eh, somewhat.”

Although I was anxious at first, I got to know Sudou from meeting at the convenience store, and Ike and Yamauchi from the incident at the pool. We occasionally eat lunch together too.

Even though I was far from having “close” friends, I was happy to have some friends.

However, human relations are mysterious things, so it isn’t clear when they became my friends.

“Yo.”

Halfway through the class, Sudou barged through the door of the class with a bang.

Ignoring the fact that it was the middle of class, he plopped down on his seat with a big yawn.

“Hey, Sudou. Ah, do you want to eat lunch later?”

Ike said in a loud voice from across the room.

The teacher continued the lesson without saying anything about Sudou. A piece of chalk would've been sent flying in a normal classroom, but this teacher seems to be completely tolerant of their behavior. At first, the class was much quieter and reserved, but these days everyone is overly relaxed.

Of course, there are a few people like Horikita who diligently study and pay attention.

My pocket vibrated, indicating that I received a text message. It's the group chat. Looks like they decided to go to the dining hall during lunch.

"Hey Horikita. Do you want to eat lunch together?"

"No thank you. You guys are very crude anyway."

"... Can't deny that."

After all, when the boys are alone, all they talk about are girls or dirty jokes. Who's cute, who's dating who, and all that stuff. It's probably bad to add girls to this kind of conversation.

"Wow... he's already done it with her? Amazing."

From their conversation, it sounds like Hirata is dating Karuizawa. Looking at her from afar, it was obvious that she was sending Hirata lovey-dovey gazes.

She's definitely cute, but she has a hard-to-approach air about her that's not indicative of a beginner in love. In other words, she's the "gal" type of girl.

In middle school, she probably went out with an ikemen just like Hirata. It's a big leap, but I'm pretty sure I'm not far off. Oops, I accidentally badmouthed her.

I apologized to her in my head.

"I hate that expression on your face."

Horikita looked at me with a cold gaze. Looks like she saw through me.

What do you have to do in order to become a couple right after the entrance ceremony? I'm still having a hard time making friends.

If I went up to Horikita and said, "Will you go out with me?"—I'd get punched immediately.

Besides, if I were to get a girlfriend, I'd like someone more refined and gentle.

1

Third period, history. Chiyabashira-sensei's class. She walked in as the bell signaling the start of class rang. The student's attitudes didn't change, though.

"Everyone, be quiet— Today's class will be more serious."

"What do you mean~ Sae-chan-sensei~"

She was already given a nickname by the class.

"It's the end of the month. We will have a short test. Pass these to the back."

She handed out papers to the first row. Eventually, the test reached my desk. The test had several questions from each of the 5 major topics.

"Eh~ I didn't hear anything~. I don't wanna take it~"

"Calm down. This test is only for future reference. It will not be reflected on your *report card*. There's no risk, so be at ease. However, cheating is naturally prohibited."

There was a slightly strange phrase included in her words. Normally, grades are reflected only in the report card. However, Chiyabashira-sensei's words are a bit different. It looks like she's implying that these grades won't be reported on our *report card*, but will be reported in some other way. Well... maybe I'm worrying too much. Since it won't be included in the report card, there's nothing to be cautious about.[1]

Once the test started, I looked through the questions. 20 questions, 4 per section, and 5 points per question for a total of a 100 points. However, the questions were extraordinarily easily, and so it felt anticlimactic.

The questions on this test are about 2 levels below the entrance exam questions. Everything here is too simple.

I thought that, but about 3 questions on the test were harder than the others. The last math problem probably can't be solved without using complicated formulas.

“No... Why are these problems so hard...”

These are clearly not for first year high school students. The last three questions are of a different nature; it wouldn’t be surprising if they were put on by mistake.

Why are they measuring our ability with this test?

Well, I’ll just solve these problems the same way I did on the entrance exam.

Chiyabashira-sensei was monitoring the students as she walked around the classroom. I glanced at Horikita, watching her steadily fill in the answers to the questions. Looks like she’ll get perfect marks.

I kept looking at the test until the final bell sounded. [2]

2

“Hey, if you tell me honestly, I’ll forgive you, ok?”

“What do you mean by ‘honestly’?”

After finishing lunch, I was chatting with Sudou and the others in front of the vending machine.

Suddenly, Ike came close.

“... We’re friends, right? Buddies that’ll stick together for the next 3 years?”

“Uh... yea. That’s right, but...”

“Then... you’ll tell us when you get a girlfriend, right?”

“Hah? Girlfriend? Well, if that ever happens.”

Ike put his arm on my shoulder.

“You’re dating Horikita, aren’t you? We won’t forgive you if you steal a march on us.”

“... Ha?”

I noticed that Sudou and Yamauchi were looking at me suspiciously.

“Stupid, we’re not dating. Not at all. No, seriously.”

"Then what were you guys talking about stealthily during class? It was something we're not allowed to hear about, isn't it. It was about dates, or about dates, or about a promise to go on a date, right!? Aahh, I'm jealous!"

"No, no. Horikita isn't that kind of girl anyway."

"I don't know that. We've never had the chance to talk anyway. If it wasn't for Kushida, we might not even know her name. She has no presence, and doesn't talk at all."

Is that so? Well, I've also never seen her talk to anyone other than me or Kushida.

"Not even knowing her name, that's cruel."

"Then do you know all of your classmate's names?"

... I tried to recall, but I could only remember half of my classmate's names. Point taken.

"Her face is cute though, right? So we were paying attention to her."

They were nodding their heads.

"Her personality is difficult, though. I don't like that kind of girl."

Sudou said after drinking his coffee.

"Yea, her personality is—how should I put it—harsh and snappy? I'd like to date someone who I can hold a good conversation with. Of course, someone cute. Someone like Kushida-chan."

Of course, Ike's favorite is still Kushida.

"Ah~ Date Kushida-chan—then do ecchi things!"

Yamauchi cried out.

"Stupid, you think you can date Kushida-chan? Fantasies are also prohibited!"

"You also dream about dating her, don't you Ike? In my dreams, I'm already sleeping with Kushida-chan!"

"What! She's doing a sexy pose in cosplay in my dreams!"

The two fought over their delusions. Hey, hey. You can fantasize whatever

you want as a high school student, but that's just being disrespectful to Kushida.

"Sudou, who are you aiming for? Are there any rumors of cute girls in the basketball club?"

"Huh? Oh, there's no one. There isn't much room for girls in the club anyway."

"Really... ? You better not be hiding that you're dating someone, absolutely not!"

"Yea, yea."

He just nodded his head at his disgusting words. Talking about girlfriends, I remembered Hirata.

"Hey, isn't Hirata dating Karuizawa now?"

"Oh, right." The other day Hondou saw the two of them holding hands."

"Damn, those two really are dating. Walking with shoulders touching."

"So they were, huh. I wonder if they did ecchi things already."

"Of course they did. Ah, I'm so jealous~!"

It feels unbelievable that first year high school students are already being ecchi. But I guess it's true.

... I feel embarrassed for thinking the same way as these guys.

"Hey, you better listen to what I'm about to say—I'm the most experienced in that sort of thing."

Yamauchi sprawled on the ground and started to talk.

"Let's listen from Hirata instead."

"Do you even think Hirata will tell us truthfully when we ask?" 'How are her breasts, is she a virgin, or did you like that?'—did you really think he'd answer?"

What kind of experiences did you want to hear about...

I went to the nearby vending machine to buy a drink. Yamauchi called out with a request.

"Get me cocoa—"

"Don't push that onto me. Buy that yourself."

"No, I've almost used up all my points. I have about 2,000 left."

"... How the hell did you use up more than 90,000 points in 3 weeks?"

"That's because I bought what I wanted to. Here, look. Isn't it great?"

Yamauchi took out a handheld gaming device.

"I went to go buy this with Ike. It's a PS Viva, a PS Viva. It's amazing that the school sells these things too." (T/N PS Vita) "How much are they?"

"About 20k points. With all options included, about 25k."

Hey, don't spend your points that quickly...

"Usually I don't play games, but since we now live in the dorms, I can play with others. Also, you know that guy Miyamoto in our class, right? He's really good at games."

Miyamoto is the slightly chubby boy in our class. I've never talked to him, but he seems like the guy to talk about games and anime all the time.

"You should also buy one and join us. Sudou said he'll be buying one as soon as he gets next month's allowance."

They started to gang up on me. Yamauchi handed me his game console to try it out. It's a lot lighter than I thought it would be. On the monitor, there was a soldier carrying a big katana while stroking a pig. What a weird world...

"Eh, to be honest, I'm not really interested. Is this... a fighting game of sorts?"

"By any chance, have you never heard of Hunter Watch? It's sold 4.8 million copies around the world! Ever since I was young, I've always had really good game sense, so I've been scouted by pros overseas. Well, I've refused those offers though."

I'm not sure whether 4.8 million is something amazing or not. There's about 7 billion people in the world.

In other words, the people who have bought this game account for less than 0.1% of the population.

"Also, why is that dainty girl wearing all that heavy equipment? Is that stuff

made of plastic? If it was made of iron, even Sudou would have trouble with it.”

“... Ayanokouji, you seem to want a realistic aspect to your games.

Are you a foreigner? Then, are you ok with automatic life regen? Do you like those Western games where you shoot someone, hide somewhere, and instantly get your stamina back? Those games are even more unrealistic.”

I could not understand anything Yamauchi was saying.

“People say that seeing is believing, right? Buy it and play with us. Ok? Ok? When you start playing, we’ll farm for materials with you. Collecting honey is hard too, you know? So, you can buy me a cocoa in advance~”

“Good grief...”

I don’t really need the honey or whatever, but I just bought the cocoa to appease him.

“This is what friendship is for! Thanks~!”

I didn’t wish for this kind of friendship. Throwing the bottle at him, Yamauchi caught it with his belly.

Well then, what should I drink? As I was hesitating, I noticed a button.

“Oh, so this is here too.”

There was an option for mineral water, free of charge.

“Anything wrong?”

“Ah, no. Hey, does the cafeteria offer any set meals that are free?”

“Are you talking about the vegetable set? Those are free. Ah, I don’t want a school life just eating veggies and drinking water~”

While drinking his cocoa, Yamauchi laughed.

Having used up all his points, he had no choice but to eat vegetables and drink water every day.

However, it’s a situation that’s easily avoidable if you’re careful. If you don’t spend all your money like Yamauchi.

“... Hey, there are quite a few people that eat the free meal.”

Since I went to the cafeteria often, I remember seeing a lot of students eating the vegetables.

“It’s probably because it’s the end of the month.”

“If that was the case, it would be fine...”

Feeling slightly anxious, I decided to get milk. I took the bottle from the slot.

“Why can’t it become next month any faster, I want my dream-like school life back!”

The three of them shouted in frustration.

3

“Hey, we’re hanging out with Kushida-chan and her friends later, you wanna go too?”

During one of the afternoon classes, I was absent-mindedly writing down notes from the blackboard when I received a text.

Oh... Is this what they call a youthful student life? This is my first time being invited somewhere after school by friends. I didn’t give any reason to refuse, but I asked who was going.

If there are a lot of people I don’t know, I probably wouldn’t go. It’d be somewhat awkward.

I quickly got a reply. Of course, Ike, Yamauchi, and Kushida were going. Then, including me, five other people. People I didn’t particularly know. If it’s that much, then I guess it’s fine. I replied, saying I would go, and another reply quickly came back.

“Kushida-chan’s mine, so don’t get in the way! – Ike-sama”

“No, no, Kushida-chan is my target, so you back off. – Yamauchi”

“Haa? You’re saying you’re also aiming for her? Are you trying to pick a fight with me? – Ike-sama”

I wish they’d got along, but rather they started fighting over Kushida.

I think hanging out after school would be fun, but now it seems like a bother.

When class ended, I left school with Ike and Yamauchi.

Because the campus is so big, I still haven't explored much of the school grounds.

"We're in the same class, but we couldn't go together with Kushida..."

"She had to talk with one of her friends in another class. Kushida-chan's a popular person, after all."

"Perhaps... she's talking to a boy?"

"It's ok, Ike, it was confirmed. She's talking to a girl."

"Good, good."

"Are you guys seriously going for Kushida?"

"Of course. She's honestly my heart's desire."

Yamauchi must have had the same opinion, since he kept nodding his head in agreement.

"Well, you're going for Horikita, right? She's beautiful, I'll give you that."

"No, there's nothing happening there. Seriously."

"Really? During class, didn't you guys glance at each other and casually hold hands? That kind of bittersweet, irritating event?"

As Ike pressed me for answers, I saw Kushida running over.

"Sorry for being late. Thanks for waiting!"

"Oh, we were waiting Kushida-chan! Wait, why is Hirata here!?"

Ike, who was excitedly jumping up and down, suddenly took a step back and exaggeratedly fell down. What a strange guy.

"Oh, he joined us on the way. He asked me if they could come. Is there something wrong?"

Kushida brought along Hirata, (what looks like) his girlfriend, Karuizawa, and two other girls. The two girls were Matsushita and Mori, who always hung out with Karuizawa.

"Hey, is there no method to refuse Hirata and send him back?"

Ike put his arms around my shoulder and whispered into my ear.

"I don't think there's any reason to send him away."

If that ikemen's there too, our existences will be thin! What are you going to do in the unlucky event that Kushida-chan falls in love with Hirata? If we make the ikemen stay away from her, there's no way the event can happen?"

"No, I wouldn't know... Also, isn't Hirata dating Karuizawa? Don't worry."

"Just because you have a girlfriend doesn't guarantee anything. If you compare a used, dirty, and gaudy girl like Karuizawa with the pretty angel Kushida-chan, anyone would pick Kushida-chan!"

As he kept fervently speaking, his spit got into my ear—feels disgusting. There are some disgusting words coming from his mouth too.

Certainly, Karuizawa looks gaudy, but she's still cute.

"But Ike... you know that there's no guarantee that a cute girl like Kushida-chan is still a virgin, right?"

Yamauchi joined our whisper conversation with an anxious voice.

"Uu, that's... that might be true... n-no, Kushida-chan must be a virgin!"

The boys continued to do as they please as they indulged in their fantasies. I wonder if you could call this discrimination against women. If possible, I'd rather not be involved in this conversation.

"Um, if we're intruding, we can go as a separate group."

Hirata said to Ike and the others in a reserved tone. He noticed our whispering.

"N-no, it's all right! Right, Yamauchi?"

"Y-yea. Let's hang out together. The more the better. Right?"

You two are being annoying! They couldn't do anything, though, because if they tried to kick Hirata and his group out, Kushida may also be disappointed with them.

"Wow, that's a pretty normal answer. Why are you three whispering stealthily by yourselves?"

Karuizawa's words were reasonable, but I was shocked that she grouped me in with them.

"Ok, here it is. I was thinking like this. If we exclude Hirata and Karuizawa, the number of boys and girls are the same. In other words, this looks like a triple date. Ayanokouji, this is your chance too, you know?"

"Yamauchi, you're fine with Matsushita, right? I'm going to talk with Kushida-chan."

"Hey, is that a joke? I'm aiming for her! We're going to get married and give our vows under a big sakura tree! It's fate waiting to happen!"

"Lies! I've thought this for a while, but all you say are lies!"

"Ha? It's all true!"

If you believed everything that Yamauchi Haruki said, he would be a very good gamer, having been scouted internationally by pros, a national-level ping pong player in elementary school, the ace of his baseball team in middle school and unmistakably a potential future pro. What a very high-spec man.

There's been no proof for any of his claims, though.

I didn't know where we were going, so I stayed in the back and followed quietly.

Ike and Yamauchi were too engrossed in their fantasies, while Hirata was surrounded on both sides.

"Let me ask frankly, Hirata. Are you dating Karuizawa?"

In order to see if Hirata was his rival, Ike asked without beating around the bush.

"Eh... Where'd you hear that?"

Hirata looked surprised and confused at the same time.

"Oh, looks like the word got out. We are dating."

Before Hirata could even respond, Karuizawa came and hugged Hirata's arm.

Giving up, Hirata scratched his cheek with his finger in embarrassment, admitting the truth their relationship.

“Seriously? I’m so envious that you get to date a cute girl like Karuizawa!”

Yamauchi said with fake envy in his voice. Lying without being conscious of it is surprisingly hard.

“Kushida-chan, do you have a boyfriend?”

While on that topic, Ike shifted the topic over to Kushida. Clever.

“Me? No, I’m not dating anyone.”

Ike and Yamauchi were rejoicing in their minds, and their expressions lifted. Your delight is leaking out...

She might be keeping a secret, but for the most part Kushida was confirmed as single. I’m also a bit glad.

“Oh no, I’m crying...!”

“Don’t cry, Yamauchi! Our hope is right in front of our eyes now!”

It’s no longer an insurmountable mountain, but rather a really steep road...

Hirata, Karuizawa, Ike, and Yamauchi all walked together, surrounding Kushida. Matsushita and Mori weren’t with the rest of the group.

They were walking behind them. I walked even further behind, all alone.

“Hey Ike, where are you going?”

A voice called out, asking about the destination. Ike looked back and brusquely replied.

“Since not a lot of time has passed since the entrance ceremony, we’re just checking out the facilities.”

There’s no clear destination. In other words, this awkward feeling will probably continue for a while...

My expectations were broken in an unexpected way.

“Ne ne, Matsushita-san, Mori-san. Do you two have anything you want to see?”

While Ike and Yamauchi were happily talking to each other, Kushida fell back and talked to the two girls.

“Eh? Oh, um, I’ve always wanted to go to the movie theater at least once.”

“Yea. Since school is over, I also want to go.”

“Oh, that’s right! I’ve always wanted to go, but didn’t yet. Karuizawa-san, how about you guys? Anywhere you want to go?”

Kushida started to organize the three groups. As expected of her. I probably couldn’t do the same thing even if I tried. Also, she would occasionally turn around and smile at me. I didn’t see that coming.

Even though I tried to ignore her, I felt troubled because she kept looking at me. I tried to convey to her that I wasn’t trying to ignore her, but that it was how my personality and way of thinking was. If Kushida couldn’t read the atmosphere, and she just liked being in the center of things, she wouldn’t be able to receive my message.

However, there are also the type of people that go “What, can’t you read the atmosphere?” after you refuse their invitation to sing at a karaoke even though you only went without ever intending to sing.

After all, egotistic people who think that singing is fun = everyone should like singing are stupid. They can’t understand that there are people who simply don’t like to sing.

While I was lost in my bitter internal monologue, the surroundings got loud and busy.

Somehow, we were next to a clothes shop... we seem to have arrived at a stylish boutique.

Everyone seems to have been here already once or twice, so I also went in without hesitation. I only went outside during the weekdays for school and stayed in my dorm for the weekend, so I never had the need to buy any casual clothes.

There were a lot of students inside, though only a few of them were upperclassmen and the rest were first-years. Maybe it’s because it’s my first

time, but I felt inexperienced and out of place inside.

After checking out a few clothes, the group walked to the nearby cafe.

Hirata was holding Karuizawa's purchases from the store. The clothes were about 30,000 points.

"Are you guys familiar with the school yet?"

"At first I was really confused, but I'm used to it now. This is the school of my dreams, I never want to graduate~"

"Ahaha, it looks like Ike-kun is thoroughly enjoying his school life, huh."

"I wish we would get more points. About 200,000... 300,000 points? After buying clothes and cosmetics, my points run out quickly."

"Wouldn't it be strange for a high school student to get 300,000 points a month for their allowance?"

"If you say it like that, then 100,000 sounds reasonable. I'm a bit scared. If my school life continues like this, I'm worried about how I would live after graduating."

"Are you talking about losing your sense of money? That really does sound scary."

The students all seem to have different opinions about our 100,000 point allowance. Karuizawa and Ike want more points, while Hirata and Kushida are scared of their life after their luxurious school experience ends.

"How about you, Ayanokouji-kun? Do you think 100,000 is too much? Too little?"

Although I was only listening at first, Kushida included me in the conversation by asking a question.

"Hmm... I don't think I really have a good grasp of it yet. I don't really know."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"You know, I can understand what Ayanokouji-kun's saying. This is far from a normal student's school life. It's impossible for me to know without a good point of comparison."

"Well, it's useless to be concerned over it. It's seriously a good thing that I got in. I can buy whatever I want. Even yesterday, I just bought myself some new clothes."

Ike's living a positive life, never looking back even once.

"Oh right, Kushida-chan, Hirata, Ike, and Karuizawa all got in, right? How'd you get in? Aren't you guys pretty stupid?"

"Yamauchi, you don't look smart either."

"Ha? I got 900 points on the APEC before."

"What's APEC?"

"You don't even know what that is? It's a really difficult English test."

"Uh, isn't that TOEIC, not APEC?"

Kushida inserted a small tsukkomi. By the way, APEC is the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

"T-they're related things."

I don't think they're related at all...

"Well, this school's goal is to nurture the youth with potential, so they probably don't pick people solely on test scores. Honestly, if they only judged by scores, I wouldn't have applied."

"That, that. The 'youth with potential' part. Those words describe us exactly."

Ike crossed his arms and nodded his head.

Despite being the preeminent school in Japan with a great employment rate, their admissions aren't based only on test scores.

But how on earth does the school see potential in these people?

The question suddenly popped into my head.

1. In this section, he recognizes that the teacher uses the particle には instead of に to say, "the test will not be reflected on your report card". The usage of the には particle instead of the に particle indicates that whereas the test isn't reflected on the report card, it might be included in some other

record.

2. The text is ambiguous as to whose test paper he actually keeps looking at.

Chapter 6: Welcome to a merit-based world

The morning bell for the first school day of May rang. Soon after, Chiyabashira-sensei walked in, holding a poster rolled into a tube. Her face is always grim and serious. Are you in menopause? If I made that joke, I think an iron bat would come full swing at my face.

“Sensei~, are you in menopause?”

Ike really asked that out loud. However, I’m shocked that we were thinking the same thing.

“Alright, morning homeroom is starting. Are there any questions before we start? If there’s something on your mind, feel free to speak up.”

Chiyabashira-sensei completely ignored Ike and continued to talk. She talked as if she was completely convinced that the students had something to ask. Immediately, several people raised their hands.

“Um, I checked my point balance this morning, and no points were deposited. Weren’t they supposed to be provided on the first day of the month, every month? I was impatient because I couldn’t buy the juice I wanted.”

“Hondou, I explained it before, didn’t I? Points are wired to student’s accounts on the first day of the month, every month. They were wired without any problems this month as well.”

“Uh, but... I didn’t get any points.”

Hondou and Yamauchi exchanged looks. Ike was too surprised to notice their looks. Certainly, I went to check my points this morning too, but my point balanced hadn’t changed from yesterday.

So I thought they would’ve been deposited later.

“... Are you guys really that stupid?”

Is she angry? Delighted? Chiyabashira-sensei had an ominous feeling about her.

“Stupid? What?”

Chiyabashira-sensei had a sharp glint in her eyes as Hondou repeated her words like an idiot.

“Sit, Hondou. I’ll explain it again.”

“S-sae-chan sensei?”

Surprised by her strict tone, Hondou slumped down into his seat.

“Points were deposited. Without fail. The likelihood that this class was left out is very low. Do you understand?”

“No, even if I say I do understand, we haven’t received our points...”

Hondou had a dissatisfied expression on his face.

However, if we say that Chiyabashira-sensei is telling the truth...

Isn’t there some kind of contradiction? Does that mean zero points have been deposited?

I had a faint doubt, but my suspicions were raised.

“Hahaha, I see, it was like that, teacher. I’ve understood this riddle now.”

Koenji said in a loud voice while laughing. Putting his feet on the table, he pointed at Hondou with his self-important attitude.

“We didn’t receive any points because we’re in class D.”

“Hah? What’s that supposed to mean. They said we’d get 100,000 points every month...”

“I don’t remember hearing that. Right?”

Smirking, Koenji then turned and pointed his finger to Chiyabashira-sensei.

“Your attitude has some problems, but what Koenji is saying is on the right track. Not many people seem to have noticed my hint. How sad.”

The classroom erupted in uproar and confusion.

“... Sensei, can I ask a question? I still don’t understand.

Hirata raised his hand. Rather than being concerned about his own points, it looks like he’s asking to help the worried students in the room. As expected of the class leader. He’s taking the initiative again.

"Please tell me why we didn't get any points. If that's not possible, we can never understand.

After all, we were never given the reason for why we were never given points.

"98 total absences and tardies. 391 incidences of talking or using cell phones in class. I counted every infraction. In this school, *your class performance is reflected in the amount points received*. As a result your behavior, the 100,000 points you could've gotten went down the drain. That's all that happened.



I explained this all on the day of the entrance ceremony. That this school measures the abilities of its students. This time around, you guys were valued to

be worth 0. There's nothing more than that."

Chiyabashira-sensei talked mechanically, without any expression. My initial doubts after coming to my school were finally answered. The worst way possible, but answered nonetheless.

In other words, even though we were given a great advantage of 100,000 points at the beginning, our class D lost all of it in a single month.

I heard the sound of a pencil on paper. Horikita was calmly trying to get the grasp of the situation as she noted the number of absences, tardies, and infractions of talking during class.

"Chiyabashira-sensei, I don't remember ever hearing that explanation before..."

"What? Are you people incapable of understanding without any explanations?"

"Naturally. There was no mention of reducing the number of points transferred to us at the beginning of each month. If it was explained before, I'm sure that we would've tried not to be late and not to talk during class."

"An interesting argument, Hirata. I also don't remember explaining the rules about the points received at the beginning of each month. However, haven't you guys learned not to talk in class and get to class on time since elementary school?"

"That is..."

"I'm pretty sure you guys have learned. In the 9 years of compulsory education, they've always told you that such things are frowned upon. Talking in class and being late to class is bad. Also, did you say that you couldn't understand because I didn't explain it? That excuse doesn't fly. If you behaved as a student should, your points wouldn't have dropped to 0. It's your own self-responsibility."

Without any room for rebuttal, her argument was completely sound. Everyone knows what is good and bad behavior, after all.

"After becoming first year high schoolers, did you really think that you would

get 100,000 points every month without any restrictions? In this school created by the Japanese government to train excellent people? That's impossible, just use your common sense. Why leave doubts as doubts?"

Although Hirata looked frustrated by her sound argument, he recovered and immediately looked at her in the eye.

"Well then, can you at least tell us the details about how points are increased or decreased? We will always try to do our best from now on."

"That's not possible. We are not allowed to divulge the details of how we assess merit to the students. It's the same as the real world. When all of you enter society, and find work in some kind of business, they probably won't tell you how you're assessed—that's up to the company, though. However... I'm not trying to be cold, nor do I hate you guys. This is such a pitiful sight that I'll tell everyone here one thing."

For the first time today, I saw a faint smile on Chiyabashira-sensei's face.

"For arguments sake, if we say that everyone stopped being late and stopped talking in class... your deduction would be zero, but that doesn't mean you'll get more points.

In other words, next month's allowance is also 0 points.

Not being late or not talking to class won't help you get back up from the bottom.

Keep that in mind—it'll help you."

"Tsu..."

=

Hirata's face got even darker. A part of the class still failed to understand; her explanation had the opposite effect. The students who wanted to change their bad behavior had their mood dampened. That is Chiyabashira-sensei's; no, the school's aim.

The bell rang, signaling the end of homeroom.

"Looks like we had too much idle chit-chat. Hopefully you understood. Anyway, let's move onto the main issue at hand."

She spread out the white poster that was rolled into a tube. Taking a magnet, she stuck it onto the board. The students looked at the paper, still confused.

“Is this... the results of each class?”

Horikita tried to explain the paper even though she was only half sure. Perhaps it's true.

Classes A to D were listed on the paper, with numbers right next to them.

Our class D with 0. Class C with 490. Class B with 650. And class A had the highest number with 940. I guess 1000 points would mean 100,000 yen? All the classes lost points in some way.

“Hey, don't you think this is strange?”

“Yea... the numbers are too clean.”

Horikita and I noticed that there was something strange about the points.

“For the first month, all of you have been doing as you please. Now, the school's not saying that this is prohibited. Your actions, such as talking during class and being late to class, just affects the number of points you get. It's the same with how you use points. You have the freedom to use points how you want. We haven't restricted how you use your points.”

“This isn't fair! We can't lead a normal school life like that!”

Ike, who had stayed quiet until now, shouted out.

Yamauchi was also crying out in agony. That guy already used up all his points...

“Look carefully, you stupid kids. Every other class except class D got some points. The amount of points you guys have should still be plenty enough to last for a month.”

“H-how do the other classes have any points left? That's strange...”

“I'll tell you, but it's not like this is some kind of fraud. For this past month, all the classes were judged by the same rules. Nevertheless, they didn't lose as many points as you guys did. That's a fact.”

“How... how is there so much difference in points between the classes?”

Hirata also noticed something odd about the numbers. The differences in points were too clean.

"Did you guys finally understand? Why you were put in class D."

"The reason we were put in class D? Isn't that because we were appropriate for this school?"

"Eh? That's how ordinary classes work, you know?"

Everyone exchanged glances.

"In this school, all the students are divided into classes by merit. The best students are put in class A. The worst in class D. Well, it's a system that's found in major cram schools. In other words, class D is the collection of leftovers. That also means that you are the worst students, the defective products of this school. This is really an outcome worthy of defective students."

Horikita's face stiffened. Looks like the reason behind the class division really shocked her.

Certainly, it's better to put smart people with other smart people, and incapable people with other incapable people. If you put rotten mandarins with good mandarins, the good mandarins will rot faster. It's inevitable that the superior Horikita is in shock at this sort of division.

However, it's probably good that I was put here. There's only one way to go and that's up.

However, this class D is the first one to lose all their points in the first month. On the contrary, I applaud you for living so lavishly until now. How praiseworthy."

Chiyabashira-sensei's unnatural applause reverberated in the classroom.

"After hitting zero points, does that mean we will always stay at zero points forever?"

"Yea. Your points will stay at 0 until graduation. However, be at ease, since you can still use your dorms, and there are free meals in the cafeteria. You won't die."

Although a student life with only the bare minimum is possible, a lot of the

students probably won't like it. After all, the students lived their lives this month while indulging in every single possible luxury. Suddenly, having to live a life a self-control looks really hard for a lot of the students.

"... Will we be made fun of by the other classes now?"

Sudou kicked his desk with a bang. After having learned that the classes are divided by merit, everyone will probably make fun of class D as the group of idiots. It's not unreasonable to be despairing.

"What, you're still holding onto your pride, Sudou? Then do your best and try to make the worst class the best class."

"Huh?"

"These class points aren't just linked to the amount of money you get each month. It's also indicative of the class rank."

So, in other words... if, for example, class D had held onto 500 points, they would be promoted to being class C. This is really like a company assessment.

"All right, I have one more piece of bad news I have to tell you guys."

She put one more piece of paper onto the blackboard. The names of all the classmates were listed. Next to everyone's name was a number.

"From looking at these numbers, I came to understand that there are a lot of idiots in this class."

She glanced at the students as her heels clacked against the floor

"These are the scores from the test a few days back. Sensei was glad after seeing your wonderful performance. Seriously, what the hell did you guys study in middle school?"

Except for the top students in the class, almost everyone got below a 60. Ignoring Sudou's wonderful score of 14 points, the next lowest was Ike's score of 24. The average score was about 65.

"If this test was actually recorded, seven of you would already have to drop out of school. Good thing it wasn't, right?"

"D-drop out? What do you mean?"

"Why, did I not explain? If you get a failing mark on either a midterm or a final exam in any subject, you have to drop out of school. On this test, that would be everyone who got below a 32. Man, you guys are really foolish and stupid."

"W-whaaaaat!?"

The seven people who failed, or in other words, Ike and his group, let out a surprised voice.

On the paper, there was a red line separating the rest of the class and the seven people, the highest of which was Kikuchi with a score of 31 points. In other words, everyone after Kikuchi failed.

"Don't fuck with me Sae-chan-sensei! Don't joke about dropping out of school!"

"I'm also at a loss for words. It's the school's rules, so prepare for the worst."

"As the teacher said, there seem to be a lot of fools here."

While polishing his nails with his feet on the desk, Koenji had a smug smirk on his face.

"What's that, Koenji!? Your marks are in the red too!"

"Fu. Where are your eyes looking at, boy? Look carefully."

"H-huh? Hey, Koenji's name is... huh?"

Scanning from the bottom, his eyes gradually reached the top. And then—he finally saw the name Koenji Rokusuke.

To his disbelief, Koenji had tied for the top score in the class. 90 points. That means that he was able to solve one of the super hard problems.

"I never thought that Sudou would be a stupid character like me...!"

Ike said out loud with a sarcasm in his tone.

"Oh, and one more thing. This school, which is under the control of the country, boasts a high percentage of alumni going to higher education and a high employment rate. That's a well-known fact. Most likely, many people in this class will go on to college or find work at a company."

That's obvious. As she said, this school has the highest employment and

college acceptance rate. There are rumors that if you successfully graduate from this school, a usually difficult college or company will become a lot easier to join. Other rumors say that graduating from this school is like getting a recommendation to be admitted to Tokyo University.

“But... things aren’t that easy in the world. People like you guys, who are of a really low level, will probably have trouble getting into college or getting a job.”

Chiyabashira-sensei’s words echoed in the classroom.

“In other words, in order to make our dreams of getting a job or getting into college a reality, surpassing class C is probably a minimum.”

“That’s also slightly incorrect, Hirata. There’s no way to achieve your dreams except for surpassing class A. The school doesn’t guarantee anything for all the other students.”

“T-that’s... that’s something I never heard about! This is absurd!”

Yukimura, who wore glasses, stood up. She was the person who tied Koenji’s score.

“How shameful. There’s nothing as pitiful as boys making a commotion and panicking.”

As if he felt something from Yukimura’s words, Koenji let out a sigh.

“... Koenji, do you not feel any resentment from being in class D?”

“Resentment? Why would I feel any resentment? I don’t understand.”

“Because we’ve been told that our class is the collection of leftovers, and that our chances of getting into higher education or getting a job are slim!”

“Fu. That’s nonsense. I can’t even respond to that sheer stupidity.”

Koenji didn’t stop polishing his nails. He didn’t even face Yukimura as he talked.

“This school just hasn’t seen my full potential yet. I value, respect, and regard myself greatly, more than any other person. Even if the school puts me in class D, it means nothing to me. If, for example, I have to drop out of school, it’s completely fine. After all, it’s the school that will come crawling back for me.”

Sounds like something Koenji would say. Is it masculinity, or is it self-conceit? Certainly, if you don't care about the school's class rankings, it doesn't matter at all. Considering his high intellect and physical ability, it is difficult to think that the students of class A are all better than Koenji. Or perhaps he was assigned to class D because of his personality.

"However, I'm not looking to go to college or find a job somewhere after I graduate. It's been decided that I will lead the Koenji Conglomerate in the future. It doesn't matter whether I'm in class A or class D."

For someone whose future has been guaranteed, there certainly is no need to be concerned about the class.

Without any words to retort, Yukimura sat back down.

"Looks like your happy mood has been dampened. If you guys understood the harsh environment you were put in from the start, we wouldn't have need this long homeroom. The midterm is in three weeks, so please avoid getting kicked out of school. I'm sure everyone here can survive without getting any red marks. If possible, please challenge your situation with a behavior appropriate for a capable person."

Closing the door for emphasis, Chiyabashira-sensei walked out of the classroom.

The red-mark students were crestfallen. Even the normally proud Sudou hung his head down in shame.

1

"What am I going to do without any more points...?"

"I used up the remainder of my points yesterday..."

After Chiyabashira-sensei left the room, the whole classroom was in an uproar.

"Even more than the points, this is a problem with the class... Why was I put in class D!?"

Yukimura vented in frustration. There were beads of sweat on her forehead.

"Wait, does that mean we won't be able to go to a college we want to go to? Then why did I come to this school in this first place? I wonder if Sae-chan-sensei hates me..."

None of the students can hide their confusion.

"I understand that everyone is panicking right now, but calm down."

Hirata took control of the class, trying to calm down the sense of impending crisis.

"How can we calm down in this situation? Are you not frustrated that we are the class of leftovers!?"

"Even if I say I am, isn't it better to work together to get out of this situation?"

"Get out of this situation? In the first place, I don't even agree with this hierarchy of classes!"

"I completely understand your feelings. However, there's no use in sitting here and complaining about it."

"What!?"

Yukimura walked up to Hirata and grabbed him by his collar.

"Calm down, you two. Ok? Surely, Sensei must have explained it to us sternly in order to cheer us up, right?"

Kushida spoke up. She broke the two apart and gently took Yukimura's balled fist in her hand. Yukimura, as one would expect, tried not to hurt Kushida and unintentionally took a step back.

"Also, it's only been a month since school has started. As Hirata-kun said, I think that it's better for all of us to persevere through this situation. Do you think I'm wrong?"

"N-no, that's... Certainly, I don't think what Kushida said is wrong, but..."

Yukimura's wrath has already dissipated away. Kushida sincerely looked at everyone in class D, wishing for everyone's cooperation.

"T-that's right. We shouldn't be impatient. There's no need for Yukimura and Hirata to fight."

“... My bad. I lost my composure for a bit there.”

“It’s fine. I should’ve chosen my words more carefully as well.”

With the help of Kushida Kikyou, the fight was resolved in an orderly way.

I took out my phone and took a picture of the class points. Noticing my actions, Horikita looked at me with a curious expression.

“What are you doing?”

“I haven’t been able to figure out the specifics behind the points yet. Haven’t you also taken some notes?”

If I can figure out the exact number of point deductions from being late to and talking in class, we can probably come up with some counter-measures.

“Wouldn’t it be hard to calculate the numbers with this little information? Also, even if you managed to figure something, I don’t think it will help resolve this problem. Simply speaking, everyone is always late and talks way too much during class.”

As Horikita said, it’s hard to come up with a conclusion with the amount of information at hand. She seems to be strangely impatient; her usual calm attitude seems to be missing.

“Are you also at this school to get into college?”

“... Why are you asking that?”

“It’s just that when she talked about the difference between class A and class D, you looked really shocked.”

“That was more or less everyone’s reaction in the class, no? Even though we were given an explanation on the first day of school, I can’t understand this new development.”

Well, that’s reasonable. The people in classes B and C are probably grumbling in discontent just like us. Every other class other than class A is treated as leftovers by the school. Trying our hardest to increase our class rank seems to be the best course of action here.

“I think that before thinking about class A or class D, we should probably work

to guarantee some points.”

“Points are only a byproduct of our efforts in class. Not having any points won’t hinder our school life. After all, this school provides everything for free at some capacity.”

Even if you think that, this is relief for those who lost all their points.

“Won’t hinder our school life, huh...”

It’s not an issue for living on bare minimum. However, there are a lot of things that can only be obtained by points. For example, leisure and entertainment. Not having any means of entertainment will probably only hurt us in the future...

“Last month, how many points did you use Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Hmm? Oh, how many points I used. I used roughly 20,000 points.”

The students who used up all their points were in trouble. Like Yamauchi, who had been panicking for some time now.

Ike also spent all his points.

“Even though I think it’s unfortunate, they’re paying for their own mistakes.”

Certainly, using up all 100,000 points in a single month is a small problem.

“We were baited by the lure of the points in the first month...”

100,000 points a month. Even though we thought it was too good to be true, everyone celebrated.

“Everyone, once classes starts, I ask that everyone pays attention earnestly. Especially you, Sudou-kun.”

Hirata attracted the attention of the noisy classroom by standing up at the podium.

“Tch, what is it.”

“This month, we didn’t get any points. This is a problem that will hugely affect our future student life. We can’t go on like this and graduate with 0 points, can we?”

“Definitely not!”

One girl shouted at Hirata’s words. Hirata gave a gentle nod.

“Of course not. So, we have no choice but to try and get some points next month. That’s why everyone in the class has to work together to fix our problem. We should refrain from being late to and talking during class. Naturally, using cell phones during class is also prohibited.”

“Ha? Why do we have to listen to what you say? If the points stay constant, there’s no reason to stop.”

“However, if we continue being late and talking during class, our points will not increase. Although we can’t go further down from 0 points, it still counts as a negative.”

“I don’t understand. Even if we work hard during class it’s not like our points will go up.”

Feeling dissatisfied, Sudou snorted and crossed his arms. Noticing Sudou’s feelings, Kushida spoke up.

“Didn’t the school say that not being late and not talking during class should be an obvious mentality?”

“Un, I also think the same way as Kushida-san. It’s the natural thing to do.”

“That’s just an explanation for your own convenience. If you understand that our points won’t increase, it’s pointless. Talk after you figure out how to increase our points.”

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with what Sudou-kun’s saying. Sorry for making you feel uncomfortable.”

Hirata bowed his head towards the disgruntled Sudou.

“However Sudou-kun, it is a fact that if we don’t cooperate, our points will never increase.”

“... It doesn’t matter what you do. Don’t involve me. Do you understand?”

As if he felt uncomfortable from staying in the classroom, Sudou left the room.

Is he gone only until class starts, or will he never return?

“Sudou-kun really can’t read the atmosphere. He’s the one that’s late the most. Even without Sudou-kun, can’t we still get some points?”

“Yea... he’s the worst. Why is he in the same class as us...”

Well, everyone was having the time of their life until this morning. There was no one complaining about Sudou then.

Coming down from the podium, Hirata walked to the front of the room.

“Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun, do you have time later? After school, I want to talk about how we can increase our points. I want you guys to participate. Can you?”

“Why us?”

“I want to hear everyone’s thoughts. However, even if I ask for everyone to speak up, I think more than half will not listen seriously.”

So that’s why he thought to ask the two of us in particular. I don’t think we can give any helpful ideas, but I guess it’s fine to participate. Even though I thought that— “Sorry, but can you ask someone else? I’m not very good at discussing things.”

“You don’t have to force yourself to say anything in particular. It’s good enough to just be there.”

“I’m sorry, but I have no intention of meeting for a pointless reason.”

“I think that this is our first trial as a united class. So—”

“I already refused. I am not participating.”

Calm yet strong words. Despite considering Hirata’s standpoint, Horikita rejected him again.

“I-is that so. Sorry... If you ever change your mind, please participate.”

Horikita already stopped paying attention to Hirata, who had given up.

“How about you, Ayanokouji-kun?”

Honestly, I thought it would be good to participate. After all, most of the class

would probably participate.

However, if Horikita was the only one to not participate, she would probably get the same treatment as Sudou.

“Ah... I’ll pass. Sorry.”

“... No, I’m the one that should be sorry, If you ever change your mind though, feel free to join.”

Hirata probably understood what I was thinking. I didn’t reject him strongly like Horikita did.

Now that the discussion was over, Horikita started preparing for the next class.

“Wow, Hirata is pretty remarkable. He was able to get everyone in action. It’s not unusual to feel depressed by the situation.”

“That’s one way to look at it. If you’re good at solving problems with discussions, there won’t be any difficulties. However, if a student that’s not very smart tries to hold a discussion, it would probably fall into mayhem. Also, I can’t bring myself to accept the situation right now.”

“Bring yourself to accept the situation? What do you mean by that?”

Horikita, without answering my question, said no more.

2

It was after school. Hirata was on the podium, using the blackboard to prepare for the discussion.

Due to Hirata’s charisma, it seems like everyone showed up except for Horikita and Sudou. Those two already left the room. Before the discussion starts, I should leave the room too.

“Ayanokouji~”

From under the desk, Yamauchi stuck out his face, still looking dead.

“The hell!? W-what’s wrong?”

“Buy this for 20,000 points~. I can’t buy anything because I have no points~”

Yamauchi put down the game console he was playing with the other day.
Don’t push your troubles onto me...

“If you sell that thing to me, who would I play it with?”

“How should I know. It’s fine though, right? It’s a good deal.”

“I’ll buy it if you lower the price to 1000 points.”

“Ayanoukouji~! I don’t have anyone else to rely on~”

“Why only me... I can’t give what I don’t have.”

Yamauchi looked up at me with watery eyes, but I averted my eyes because I felt bad.

He realized that asking me for points wasn’t going to work, so he switched to another target.

“Hasebe! I have a favor for my best friend! Buy this game console for 22,000 points!”

Looks like he’s trying to get Hasebe to buy it now. Furthermore, he shamelessly increased the price.

“Must be hard for everyone who’s used up their points...”

Kushida said while watching the exchange between Yamauchi and Hasebe.

“Kushida, are you ok on points? Girls have a lot of various necessities, after all.”

“Hmm, well, for now. I’ve used up about half my points. I used too many points this first month, so it’ll be hard to control myself. Ayanokouji-kun, how about you?”

“It’s certainly difficult for someone who’s popular to live a school life without spending money. ...I’ve practically used up none of points. I don’t have anything that I particularly need, either.”

“Is that because you don’t have friends?”

“Hey...”

"Ahaha, sorry, sorry. I didn't mean any offense."

Kushida apologized to me while giggling. She's so cute when she laughs like that.

"Um, Kushida-san?"

"Karuizawa-san, what is it?"

"To be honest, I used up all my points. I've already gotten some help from the other girls in the class, but I also thought to ask Kushida-san. We're friends, right? I only need about 2000 points."

Karuizawa asked for points from Kushida with a fake laugh. This should be an instant rejection.

"Un, ok."

I shouted "Ok!?" in my mind, but I guess it's up to the person as to how they decide their friends.

Without wavering at all, Kushida decided to help Karuizawa.

"Thanks~. Friends are really useful. This is my number. Well then, see you later~. Ah, Inogashira-san, to be honest, I used up all my points~"

Moving onto her next target, Karuizawa walked away from us.

"Was that ok? Your points probably won't come back."

"I can't send a friend away when they come asking for help. Karuizawa-san also has a lot of friends, so it's probably hard for her without too many points."

"However, I think that having used up all 100,000 points should be your own problem."

"Ah, but how do I even transfer my points?"

"You received a slip of paper from Karuizawa with a number, right? You can transfer points using your cell phone."

"Wow, the school really thought of everything for the students. They even created a system like this to help people like Karuizawa-san."

Certainly, it is a help to Karuizawa. However, was it really necessary to send

her money? Looks like a bunch of trouble instead.

"Ayanokouji-kun from class D. Chiyabashira-sensei is calling for you. Please come to the staff room."

After a jingle, a voice came over the loudspeaker.

"Looks like you were called by the teacher."

"Yea... Sorry, Kushida. I'll be going."

Since the first day of school, I don't remember doing anything that would get me called. Feeling the heavy gazes of the other students, I exited the room.

I reached the staff room and timidly opened the door. Looking around the room, I didn't see Chiyabashira-sensei anywhere. I called out to the teacher that was checking their own face in the mirror.

"Um, is Chiyabashira-sensei here?"

"What? Sae-chan? She was here until a few moments ago..."

The teacher who looked back had wavy, shoulder-length hair that gave off an adult-like impression. She said Chiyabashira-sensei's name as if they were close. They also look close in age.

"Looks like she had something to do. Do you want to wait inside?"

"No, I'll wait in the hallway."

I don't feel comfortable in areas like the staff room. Because I didn't want to attract any attention, I decided to stay in the hallway. As soon as I thought that, the teacher walked out into the hallway.

"I'm Hoshinomiya Chie, responsible for class B. I've been best friends with Sae since high school. We're close enough to call each other Sae-chan and Chie-chan~."

I've never heard of her before, but it seems like some useless information.

"Ne, why did Sae-chan call you here? Ne ne, why?"

"Who knows. I don't know the reason either..."

"I don't understand. You were called out without being given the reason?"

Fuun? What's your name?

A barrage of questions. She examined me up and down.

"My name's Ayanokouji."

"Ayanokouji-kun? Isn't that a cool name~. You're popular, right~?"

What is this overly casual teacher. She's closer to a student than she is to a teacher like Chiyabashira-sensei. If this were an all-boys school, she'd probably capture the hearts of every student.

"Ne ne, do you already have a girlfriend?"

"No... um, I'm not really popular."

I tried to make myself look offended and hurt, but Hoshinomiya-sensei still assertively approached me. With smooth motions, she grabbed my shoulders with her slender, beautiful hands.

"Fuun? That's weird, I would've totally gone for you if we were in the same class~. Is it because you're too innocent? Or are you tsuntsun?"

She poked my cheeks with her fingers. I wasn't sure what to say. If I suddenly licked her fingers, she'd probably stop, but if it's brought up at a staff meeting, I'd probably be expelled immediately.

"What are you doing, Hoshinomiya?"

Suddenly, Chiyabashira-sensei hit Hoshinomiya-sensei's head with a clipboard. Hoshinomiya-sensei squatted down, holding her head in pain.

"Oww. What'd you do that for!"

"That's because you were doing weird things with students in here."

"I was only talking to him while he was waiting for you to come back!"

"Just leave it at that. Sorry for making you wait, Ayanokouji. Well then, let's move to the guidance room."

"No, I didn't wait long. Also, the guidance room... did I do something? I thought I was living a non-conspicuous school life."

"A good response. Come with me."

I followed Chiyabashira-sensei while thinking “What’s this about...”.

Suddenly, Hoshinomiya-sensei walked up next to me with a smile. When she noticed, Chiyabashira-sensei turned around and looked at her with a look of a demon.

“Not you, you stay back.”

“Don’t say it so coldly~. It’s no big deal if I listen too, right? Besides, Sae-chan isn’t the type to give one-on-one lessons, right? Also, to take Ayanokouji-kun to the guidance room out of the blue... do you have some kind of goal?”

Replying to Chiyabashira-sensei’s question with a grin, she got behind me and put her hands on my shoulders.

I couldn’t see Hoshinomiya-sensei’s face, but I understood that there was electricity in the air.

“By any chance, Sae-chan, are you looking for a younger man?”[1]

A younger man? What do you mean by that?

“Don’t say stupid things. That’s impossible.”

“Fufu, certainly. It’s impossible for Sae-chan~”

Hoshinomiya-sensei kept following us.

“How long are you going to follow us? This is a problem concerning class D.”

“Eh? Can’t I go with you? Is that no good? Look, I can give advice too~”

As Hoshinomiya-sensei followed us against our will, a student suddenly walked up in front of us and blocked our way.

It was a beautiful girl with light pink hair that I’ve never seen before.

“Hoshinomiya-sensei. Do you have time right now? The student council has matters to discuss.”

She looked at us for a moment, but went back to facing Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“Look, she’s looking for you. Hurry up and go.”

Chiyabashira-sensei hit Hoshinomiya-sensei’s butt with her clipboard.

“Mou~. I think she’ll get mad if I stay any longer, so see you later, Ayanokouji-

kun. Well, let's go to the staff room, Ichinose-san."

With that, she turned on her heel and went back to the staff room with Ichinose.

After seeing off Hoshinomiya-sensei, Chiyabashira-sensei lightly scratched her head and continued walking towards the guidance room. Soon after, we arrived at the guidance room, which was right next to the staff room.

"Then... what was the reason you called me?"

"Umu, about that... before I talk about that, come over here."

While glancing at the clock on the wall, she opened a door that was in the room. She put a kettle on top of the stove in the office kitchen.

"I'll be making some green tea. Are you ok with roasted green tea?"

I picked up the container with roasted green tea powder.

"Don't do anything extra. Enter quietly. Until I say it's ok to come back out, stand here quietly. If you don't, you'll be expelled."

"Ha? What do you mean—"

Without giving me an explanation, she closed the office kitchen door. What the hell is she trying to do? I stayed quiet as she told me to, and before long, I heard the sound of the guidance room door opening.

"Here, come in. Well then, what do you have to say to me? Horikita."

It looks like Horikita was the one who was called into the guidance room.

"I will ask you frankly. Why was I put into class D?"

"Are you really asking frankly?"

"Today, sensei said that the classes were divided by superiority. And that class D was the lowest collection of leftovers."

"I did indeed say that. It looks like you consider yourself as a 'superior' person."

I wonder how Horikita will reply to that. I'm betting that she'll confidently object to her words.

"I believe that I solved nearly all the problems on the entrance exam, and had no big mistakes during the interview. At the very least, I don't think I should be in class D."

Look, I got it dead-on. Horikita's the type to think of herself as the best. She isn't self-conscious either, and really thinks that she's superior to everyone else. On the results of the test, Horikita was also tied for first place.

"Solved nearly all the problems on the entrance exam, is it. Usually, we can't show the results of the entrance exam, but I'll give you a special exception. I have your answer sheet here by chance."

"You are thoroughly prepared, I see. ...Looks like you also knew I would come here to protest my placement."

"I'm a teacher. I understand the students to some degree at the very least. Horikita Suzune. As you thought, on the entrance examination, you were 3rd place among the incoming first-years. Your scores were behind first and second by only a small margin. You did very well. There were no particular problems that we observed during the interview either. Rather, you were highly rated."

"Thank you very much. Then—why?"

"Before that, why are you dissatisfied with class D?"

"There is no one that would be happy when they are not correctly evaluated. Also, the differences between classes also greatly affect future prospects. It's only natural that I'm unhappy."

"Correctly evaluated? Hey hey, your evaluation of yourself is too high.'

Chiyabashira-sensei snickered, or rather, openly laughed, at Horikita.

"I recognize that your academic ability is high. You are definitely smart. However, who decided that smart people were the ones who got into the superior classes? We never said that."

"That's—that's just common sense."

"Common sense? Didn't that 'common sense' create the broken Japan we live in now? Indeed, we used to separate the inferior from the superior using the test scores. As a result, incompetent people tried to make up the difference in

desperation to defeat the truly superior people. In the end, it led to a heredity system.”

The heredity system means that social status, honor, and job are all passed on and inherited.

Hearing those words, I unintentionally let out a low groan. My chest hurts.

“Certainly, you have the ability to study. I won’t deny that. However, this school’s goal is to produce excellent people. It is a big mistake to think that you can be assigned to a superior class by only studying. That was the very first thing we explained, at the entrance ceremony. Besides, think about it calmly. Do you think someone like Sudou would make it if we determined acceptance only by intelligence?

“Tsu...”

Even though this is one of the best schools in Japan, they accept students that are interested in areas other than studying.

“Also, it’s rash to say that there is no one that would be happy when they are incorrectly evaluated. Class A, for example, receives a lot of pressure from the school and a lot of envy from the lower classes. Competing under heavy pressure is harder than you think. There are students that are fine with being evaluated lower than they actually are.”

“That’s a joke, right? I can’t understand those kind of people.”

“Really? I think there are a few in class D. Oddball students that would stay in a low-level class with pleasure.

It seemed as though she was talking to me through the wall.

“You still haven’t explained clearly. Is my placement in class D the truth, and was there no mistake in my evaluation? Please double check.”

“It’s too bad, but your placement in class D was not a mistake. You’re definitely in class D. You are a student only at that level.

“... Is that so. I will hear from the school at another time.”

It looks like she decided that her homeroom teacher was not the right person to ask, and didn’t give up.

"You'll get the same result if you try to talk to anyone in a higher position. There's no need to be that disappointed. As I said this morning, classes can overtake and surpass one another. Remember that there is the possibility of rising up to class A before graduation."

"It does not seem like a very easy path. How will the immature class D ever get more points than class A? No matter how I look at it, it is impossible."

That was Horikita's honest opinion. There is an enormous point difference this time.

"I wouldn't know. It's your own choice whether or not to head down that reckless path. By any chance, do you have a special reason as to why you need to be in class A?"

"That is... I will excuse myself for today. However, please remember that I still do not understand."

"All right, I'll remember that."

I heard the sound of a chair being pulled. Looks like the discussion ended.

"Oh, right. I called another person to the guidance room. It's a person that's also relevant to you."

"Relevant to me...? No way... Niisa—"

"Come out, Ayanokouji."

Don't call me with such bad timing. All right, I won't come out.

"If you don't come out, you'll be expelled."

C-cruel. You shouldn't unfairly use expulsion as a weapon.

"How long will you make me wait?"

While letting out a sigh, I exited the office kitchen and into the guidance room. Naturally, Horikita was surprised.

"Were you... listening to us?"

"Listening? I know you guys were talking about something, but I didn't hear anything. The walls are pretty thick."

"That's not true. You can hear everything clearly from that kitchen."

For some reason, it looks like Chiyabashira-sensei wanted to drag me out into the room.

"... Sensei, why would you do that?"

Horikita immediately noticed that this was a setup. The anger was clear on her face.

"Because I decided it was necessary. Well then Ayanokouji, I'll tell you the reason I called you."

Chiyabashira-sensei shot down Horikita's question and turned her attention to me.

"Excuse me then..."

"Wait Horikita. It is better for you to listen to the end. This'll be a hint for how you can get up to class A."

Horikita stopped in her tracks and sat back down in her chair.

"Please keep it short."

Looking down at her clipboard, Chiyabashira-sensei laughed.

"You're an interesting student, Ayanokouji."

"I'm not interesting at all, not as interesting as someone like Chiyabashira who has a strange surname."

"Do you want to prostrate yourself in front of all the Chiyabashira-san's in the country? Hmm?"

No, even if you looked all of the country for other Chiyabashira's, there would probably be no one else other than you...

"After your entrance examination results, I was thinking about potential individual teaching methods, but after seeing your test results, my interest was piqued. I was surprised at first."

A familiar answer sheet from the entrance exam was on the clipboard.

"50 points in Japanese, 50 points in math, 50 points in english, 50 points in

history, 50 points in science... and the result of the most recent test was also 50 points. Do you know what this means?"

In surprise, Horikita looked over my test form then shifted her gaze to me.

"What a frightening coincidence."

"Hou? You're going to claim that your results are a coincidence to the very end? It's clearly intentional."

"It's a coincidence. You have no proof. Anyway, what benefit would I get from manipulating my own results? If I had a brain that could get high marks, I would aim for perfect scores in all subjects."

Watching me feign innocence, she let out a sigh with a look of amazement.

"Honestly, you're a really weird student. Are you sure? Math problem #5 was only solved by 3% of all students this year. Additionally, you included a complex formula and used it flawlessly. On the other hand, the correct answer rate of #10 was 76%. Did you make a mistake? Or is that 'normal'?"

"I don't know what's normal in this world. It's a coincidence, a coincidence."

"Good grief. I admire your attitude, but it'll cause problems for you in the future."

"I'll think about that when I have to."

Chiyabashira-sensei sent Horikita a look that said, "How was that?"

"Why do you... pretend that you don't understand?"

"No, like I said, it's a coincidence. It's not like I'm hiding that I'm a genius or something."

"What do you think? He might be more intelligent than you are, Horikita."

Horikita visibly flinched. Sensei, please don't say anything unnecessary.

"I don't like studying, nor do I want to try my best. That's why I get those kind of scores."

"It's not about the students who choose this school. Like you and Koenji, there are others who are fine with either class A or class D."

It's not just this school, but even the teachers aren't normal. During their conversation earlier, Chiyabashira-sensei was able to upset Horikita with her words. It's as if they hold the "secrets" of all the students.

"What is it? What other reasons are there?"

"Do you want to hear about it in detail?"

I noticed that Chiyabashira-sensei had a sharp glint in her eye. Somehow, it seems like she's trying to provoke her.

"No, I'll stop here. If I kept listening, I think I would go crazy and destroy all the furniture in here."

"If you do that, Ayanokouji will be demoted to class E."

"There's such a class?"

"Certainly. Class E means expelled. In other words, dropping out of school. Well, the conversation ends here. Enjoy your student life from now on."

What a sarcastic remark.

"I will also leave. It's time for the staff meeting to start. I'm going to close this room, so let's leave the room."

She pushed the two of us out of the room. Why did Chiyabashira-sensei make the two of us meet? She doesn't look like the type to do meaningless actions.

"Anyway... shall we go back?"

I started walking away without waiting for her to confirm. It's probably better for us to walk back separately.

"Wait."

Horikita called out to me to stop, but I kept walking. If I get away from her until we've reached the dorms, my goal would be successful.

"Is your score... really a coincidence?"

"I already said it was. Or do you have any evidence that I'm doing it on purpose?"

"I don't have any evidence, but... Ayanokouji-kun, I don't understand. You

avoid troublesome things, and you don't have any interest in class A."

"You also have some unusual thoughts about class A."

"... Should I not? I'm working to make my future prospects more advantageous."

"No, it's perfectly natural."

"That has been my goal ever since I entered this school. In truth, it's a bit different. I'm not even at the start line yet."

I noticed that Horikita sped up her pace and was walking beside me.

"Then, are you aiming for class A?"

"First, I want to find the real intention of the school. Why I was put into class D. Chiyabashira-sensei said that I was only judged as someone fitting for class D, so... When I figure it out, I'll aim for class A No, I'm always aiming for class A."

"That's going to be really hard. You'll have to fix those problem children. Sudou's perpetual lateness, the talking during class, and the test scores. Even if you achieve that, it's still ±0."

"... I already know that. I'm still hoping that my placement was a mistake by the school."

Horikita's previously overflowing confidence had turned into anxiety. Do you really "already know"?

The only conclusion I got from today's information is the word "despair". If you follow the basic rules of school life, minuses can be avoided to a certain extent. However, the crucial thing is that we don't know how to turn minuses into pluses. The most superior class, class A, still had a small detraction of points.

Even if we do find a way to increase our points efficiently, the other classes would also find a way to do the same.

Also, once there is a huge point difference, it is very difficult to stay competitive among the classes in limited time.

"I can understand your thoughts to some extent. However, I don't think that

the school will continue to carefully watch the students. Then there would be no meaning in competing.”

“I see, you can also think of it that way.”

I read that the school does not allow class A to escape in the first month of admission. In other words, Horikita believed that this was our chance to make a big increase in points.

“Are you thinking of taking care of this situation with your own hands?”

“Yes.”

“What a quick answer.”

A hand stabbed my sides. Horikita ignored me when I made a painful expression.

“Ouch... I understand your feelings, but it’s not a problem you can solve on your own. I’m talking about Sudou. Even if you improve yourself, there’s nothing you can do if the rest of a class is a minus.”

“No, it’s slightly different. Certainly, a person can’t achieve anything by themselves, but if everyone doesn’t put in their own effort, it’ll be an extraordinarily difficult problem. Unless everyone does it, we can’t even begin to compete against the other classes.”

“So what are you going to do? All you’ve done is admit that it’s a huge problem.”

“There are 3 key points we need to fix in order to improve. Tardies and talking during class. And then making sure that everyone passes the midterm.”

“The first two will probably be done to some extent. However, the midterms are...”

The small test from the few days ago did have some hard problem, but overall it was easy. There’s a lot of students who still fail at that level, so the midterms look bleak, to be honest.

“Also—I want to ask for Ayanokouji-kun’s cooperation.”

“Cooperation?”

Horikita looked at me with a blatantly unpleasant expression.

"You refused Hirata earlier this morning, so I can refuse for the same reason, right?"

"Do you want to refuse?"

"If I said I would gladly help?"

"I never thought you would go as far as to say you would gladly help, but I don't think you would refuse either. If you really didn't want to help, then... I wouldn't ask further. It can't be helped if you refused the same way I did. Well then, can I expect your help or not?"

If possible, I want to remember the words she used to refuse Hirata before... However, I don't want to bluntly refuse someone who's asking. No, no, stay calm. If I say that I will help, I'll probably be worked to death until graduation. I need to have a heart like a demon here.

"I refuse.

"I believed that Ayanokouji-kun would agree to cooperate from the start. I give you my gratitude."

"I didn't say that! I completely refused!"

"No, I heard the voice in your mind. You said that you would help."

Scary, she read my mind.

"I don't think there's anything I can particularly help you with."

Horikita's definitely a smart person. I don't think there's any need for my skills.

"It's nothing to worry about. I don't need your brainpower. Leave the plans to me, and you can be the muscle."

"Ha? Why should I be the muscle?"

"Aren't you worried about our class' points? If you follow my instructions, I promise to make our points positive. I can guarantee that."

"I'm sure you have some kind of plan, but you can rely on people other than me. If you make friends, you can ask them to help."

"It's too bad, but there is no one else in class D other than you that is remotely competent."

"No no, there are a lot of people. For example, Hirata. A classmate like him has a lot of influence in the class and is smart—he's perfect. Moreover, he is worried that you don't have any friends."

If you reach out to him, you'll probably become good friends soon.

"He's no good. Even if he has talent and ability, I can't accept him. If I make a comparison, I need a chess piece. What I want now is not gold nor silver, but rather a pawn."

Are you calling me a pawn then? Is that what you're calling me?

"A pawn can also be used to make money."

"An interesting reply, but you're a person that wouldn't make much of an effort. Haven't you been thinking, 'I'm ok with being a pawn, but I don't want to admit it'?"

She shot back a tsukkomi on the spot. If I were a normal person, my feelings would be hurt.

"Sorry, but I can't help you. I'm not suited for this."

"Well, you can contact me once you collect your thoughts. I will look forward to then."

My words didn't reach Horikita.

1. She means a relationship where the younger one is dominant, but I wasn't sure how to say that elegantly, so here's a footnote.

Chapter 7: The group of failures

It's the first weekend of May. Ike and the others started listening to the teachers silently. Only Sudou kept sleeping through class, but no one tried to stop him. Because no one find a reliable way of increasing our points, Sudou's habits were not fixed.

However, Sudou still received the ire of a lot of the classmates every day.

... I'm sleepy too. Because it's the period right before lunch, it's hard to stay awake. I also stayed up late watching a movie. It'd be great if I could fall asleep now...

"W-whoah!?"

As I was nodding off, my right arm experienced some severe pain.

"What is it, Ayanokouji? You suddenly shouted. Is this your rebellious age?"

"N-no. Sorry, Chiyabashira-sensei. Some dust entered my eye..."

Normally, the students would've started whispering, but they stayed quiet and sent me glances instead, still being wary of the points. Rubbing the sore part of my arm, I glared at my neighbor. In my line of sight, I saw Horikita holding a compass needle in her hand.

This isn't a normal situation. Why does she even have compasses on hand? I don't even think there's a reason to use them during class. As soon as class ended, I went up to Horikita.

"There are things that are OK to do and things that are not ok!" Compasses are dangerous!"

"Are you mad at me?"

"You made a hole in my arm! A hole!"

"What are you talking about? When did I poke Ayanokouji-kun with a compass needle?"

"You're holding a dangerous weapon in your hand."

“Are you saying I stabbed you just because I’m holding something in my hand?”

I woke up not because of the class, but from the pain.

“Be careful. If they saw you dozing off, our points would be subtracted.”

Horikita started being wary of such things in order to get us out of class D. Protesting to the school resulted in nothing for her. Ah, it hurts. Dammit, if Horikita dozes off during class, I’ll do the same thing to her.

As everyone stood up to go to lunch, Hirata started to talk.

“The test that Chiyabashira-sensei mentioned is coming up soon. Everyone understands that they’ll have to drop out of school if they receive failing marks. So, I think that it would be best if we form study groups.”

It looks like the hero of class D decided to start a charity project.

“If you neglect your studies, you’ll immediately receive failing grades and drop out. I want to avoid that situation. Studying isn’t solely for avoiding that situation, because there is also a high possibility that our test scores are reflected on our points. If we get high grades, the assessment of our class would probably go up. I asked some of the people who got good grades to help out. So, I would like people who are worried about their grades to come participate in the study group. Of course, everyone is welcome to join.”

Hirata stared at Sudou while he made his speech.

“... Tch.”

Sudou averted his eyes, crossed his arms, then closed his eyes.

Every since Sudou rejected Hirata’s invitation to do a self-introduction, their relationship has been bad.

“From 5 o’clock today until the day of the test, I plan to study every day for 2 hours in this classroom. If you have any thoughts of participating, please come. Of course, it’s fine if you have to leave halfway. That’s all.”

As soon as he said that, several of the students with failing marks stood up and went to Hirata.

Sudou, Ike, and Yamauchi were the only ones that didn't go up to Hirata. Ike and Yamauchi hesitated for a moment, but in the end, they didn't approach him.

I wasn't sure whether they were afraid of Sudou's bad mood, or if they were simply jealous of his popularity.

1

"Are you free during lunch? Do you want to eat together?"

During break-time, Horikita came up to me asked.

"An invitation from you is unusual. I feel scared for some reason."

"It's nothing to be scared about. I can buy you the vegetable set, if you're fine with it."

Isn't that the free meal...?

"Just kidding. I'll seriously buy you whatever you want to eat."

"Definitely scary. Is there some kind of catch?"

Seeing as how Horikita invited me to eat with her, I can't help but feel suspicious.

I would be suspicious if I was invited out of the blue. I remember Horikita saying that before.

"If we always doubted everyone else's true intentions, human society wouldn't function, right?"

"Well, that's true, but..."

I didn't have anything planned, so I followed Horikita to the cafeteria.

I chose one of the more expensive meals, found a seat, and sat down with Horikita.

"Well then, itadakimasu?"

Horikita was staring at me as if she was waiting for me to eat.

"What's wrong, Ayanokouji-kun? Why aren't you eating?"

“O-oh.”

Scary. There’s definitely a catch somewhere. There’s no way that this is for free. Nevertheless, I can’t stall forever. It’d be wasteful if I let it go cold. I hesitantly took one bite of my croquette.

“It’s sudden, but listen to me.”

“I have a bad feeling about this...”

As I thought of getting up and running away, my hand was grabbed.

“Ayanokouji-kun, I’ll say it again. Won’t you listen to me?”

“Fua...”

“Ever since Chiyabashira-sensei’s advice, the number of infractions during class has certainly decreased. It wouldn’t be wrong to say that more than half the reason for our deducted points has been erased.”

“Yea, that’s true. It wasn’t a really hard problem to solve, though.”

It may not last very long, but at least the last few days are much better than before.

“Now, the next thing we have to do is to improve the test scores for the midterm in two weeks. Earlier, Hirata-kun also started to take some action.”

“Study groups, huh. Well... I guess it would help. However—”

“However, what? Sounds like you’re implying something. Do you have any problems with study groups?”

“No, don’t worry about it. It’s strange to see you worried about other people, though.”

“Originally, I couldn’t even imagine getting a failing score. However, it is true that there are students in the world that inevitably fail their tests.”

“Are you talking about Sudou and his friends? Ruthless words as always, I see.”

“I’m only saying the truth.”

Since none of the students could leave school grounds, contact anyone on the

outside, or attend cram school, there was no other option but to be taught by other students.”

“I’m somewhat relieved because Hirata-kun proactively started up a study group. However, Sudou-kun, Ike-kun, and Yamauchi-kun didn’t join, right? I still feel uneasy.”

“Oh, those guys. They’re not on very good terms with Hirata. They wouldn’t participate.”

“In other words, those guys will probably fail. And in order to get up to class A, we have to avoid getting negative points and focus on staying positive, right? I also think there’s a high possibility that good test scores are related to getting positive points.”

It’s natural to think that the students would get a reward proportional to the effort they put in.

“What if—you also hold a study group like Hirata? So that we can help out Sudou, Ike, and Yamauchi.”

“Yea. I have no objections to that. You probably think that’s surprising, huh?”

“Your whole attitude is surprising for me.”

I’m not really surprised, though. She’s still doing this for herself, and I never thought she was particularly cold either.

“Well, I got that you want to move up to class A. However, I honestly never thought that you would use such an ordinary method as teaching them. After all, those kind of people hate studying. You also stayed away from the other students on the first day, right? It’s commendable that someone like you who doesn’t want friends would offer to teach them.”

“That’s why I’m talking to you, isn’t it? Fortunately, they’re people close to you, right?”

“Ha? ... Hey, are you really—”

“It’ll be faster if you talk to them. There’s no problem since they’re your friends, right? Here, just bring them to the library. I can help them study.”

“You say some unreasonable things. Do you even think that someone like me,

who is leading a harmless and inoffensive life, could do that?"

"It's not a matter of 'can do' or 'can't do'. Just do it."

Am I your dog or something?

"It's your freedom to aim for class A, but don't involve me in your plans."

"You ate, right? My treat. Lunch. That wonderful, tasty special meal."

"All I got was the honest good will of another human."

"Too bad, but that wasn't out of kindness."

"I can't hear you... Here, I'll give you some points. We're even now."

"I won't stoop as low as to receive gifts from other people. I will turn down your offer."

"I'm starting to feel angry at you for the first time..."

"How is it? Will you cooperate with me? Or are you going to make an enemy of me?"

"It's like you're pointing a gun at my head and threatening me..."

"It's not 'like', I really am threatening you."

Is this the power of violence? It's very effective.

Well... If it's only gathering them, I guess there's no problem cooperating, right?

Horikita's weakest point is that she won't make any friends.

Also, Sudou, Ike, and the other are all people that I became friends with after much trouble. I can't have them drop out of school this quickly.

When I was hesitating, Horikita pressed me even further.

"You also don't think that I would forgive you for colluding with Kushida-san to call me out, right?"

"You said you wouldn't blame for that. Bringing that up now is unfair."

"I said that to Kushida-san, but I don't remember saying that to you."

"Wow, you dirty..."

"If you want me to forgive you, work together with me."

Looks like there was no escape route for me since the very beginning.

I thought that she would just drop the subject, but I guess it's only possible by listening to her request now.

"There's no guarantee that they'll come. Are you fine with that?"

"I believe that you can gather everyone. Here, this is my phone number. If something happens, contact me."

Although it was in a unusual way, for the first time in my high school life, I got the contact info of a girl.

It's Horikita's, though... Well, I'm not particularly happy about it.

2

I looked around the classroom. Well then, what is it that I'm looking for?

If I asked "Do you want to study together after school?", would anyone come?

Me, Sudou, and Ike were only close enough to occasionally eat together. However, they stayed far away from studying.

... I have nothing to lose. I'll just try asking them once.

"Sudou, you free?"

I talked to Sudou, who was walking back to the classroom during the lunch break. He was sweaty and breathing heavily.

He probably went to go play basketball during the lunch break.

"What are you planning on doing for the midterms?"

"That, huh... I got no idea. I've never studied seriously before."

"Oh, really? I got something just right for you. I was thinking of studying after school starting from today. You wanna join?"

Sudou thought about it for a while, his mouth slightly open.

"Are you asking seriously? If school lessons are troublesome for me, I don't

think I could study after school. Also, I have club activities. It's impossible, impossible. Are you going to be teaching? Your scores weren't good either, you know."

"Nah, Horikita will be teaching."

"Horikita? I don't know much about her. Sounds suspicious, so I refuse. I'll manage by cramming before the test. You can go now."

As I thought, Sudou rejected my invitation. He didn't get the point.

Dammit, it was no good. If I pressed any further, he might actually punch me. Well, it can't be helped. Let's start with someone that's easier. I called out to Ike, who was playing with his phone by himself.

"Hey Ike—"

"Pass! I overheard you talking to Sudou. Study group? Nah, not my thing."

"You know you'll have to drop out if you fail, right?"

"I did get red marks before, but now I'm better. I'll do my best while cramming the night before with Sudou."

Is he really saying that he'll be fine with that? He doesn't even sense the impending danger.

"If that last short test wasn't a surprise, I would've gotten at least 40 points."

"I know what you mean to say. But, there are some things that are left to chance, you know?"

"After school is a precious time for high school students. I won't spend my time studying."

He waved his hands, telling me to leave already. Chatting with a girl over text, he was overly excited. Ever since Hirata started going out with someone, Ike was also desperate to get a girlfriend. I dropped my shoulders and went back to my seat. Appealing to Horikita, I tried to get her to give up.

"No use."

"... I heard you, but what are you saying?"

"I said, 'no use'. You're don't think that you're off the hook with that, are

you?"

Dammit. How brazen of her to refuse my appeal.

"No, of course not. I still have 425 more tactics left."

I looked around the classroom again. Far from being nervous, the whole classroom had a relaxed atmosphere.

A method to make students who hate studying study. Also, a way to make students use up their free time, instead of class time to study. Normally, I would refuse too, but since they're in danger of failing...

I thought Sudou, who rejected my offer, would participate in studying at the first chance he got.

I have no choice but to set up some kind of incentive. Make him believe that there will be a reward if they study. And if possible, make it easy to understand; then, the plan would be a success.

—I got it!

Receiving a divine revelation from the gods, I turned to Horikita with widened eyes.

"Even though it's your role to help them study, it's not easy to invite them to study. I need your power for that, though—can you help?"

"What power? I'll listen... but what should I do?"

"How about something like this? You'll be their girlfriend if they get a perfect score on the test. They'll surely bite if we add that incentive. The motivation for boys is always girls."

"You want to die?"

"No, I'd like to live."

"I listened because I thought you seriously came up something. I'm stupid for believing that."

No, I really thought it would work. It would probably become their biggest motivation to study. However, Horikita clearly doesn't understand boys' hearts.

"Fine, then. A kiss. You'll give them a kiss if they get a perfect score."

“You really want to die, huh?”

“Well, I’d like to live for a bit longer.”

A hand quickly hit the back of my neck. Dammit, Horikita is showing no signs of agreeing to my proposed reward. It would be exceptionally effective. Guess I’m back to square one.

As I thought that, I noticed a conspicuous presence in the middle of the classroom. Not Hirata, but another person who was popular in the class. It was Kushida Kikyou.

She looks bright and lively, like always. A sociable figure that both boys and girls can freely talk to. Indeed, Ike was madly in love with Kushida, whereas Sudou and the others didn’t have a bad impression of her. Also, her test scores would be relatively high. She’s important to my plan.

“Hey—”

As soon as I called out to her to invite her, I reconsidered and gave up.

“What is it?”

“No... it’s nothing.”

She doesn’t like being involved with other people. Last time, when I worked with Kushida during Operation Become Friends, Horikita got mad.

For this study group, Horikita probably wouldn’t accept Kushida, who didn’t get any red marks.

For now, I’ll wait until Horikita returns to the dorms before putting my plan to action.

3

Just like that, it was after school. Horikita quickly left the classroom and returned to the dorms, like always. Time to put my plan to action. I have to get Kushida on board.

“Are you free?”

I called out to Kushida, who was preparing to go home. At the unexpected

voice, she turned her head.

“It’s unusual for Ayanokouji-kun to talk to me. Do you need me to do something?”

“Yea. If it’s fine with you, I want to talk to you outside.”

“I’m going to go hang out with my friends, so I don’t have much time but... sure.”

Without any negative feelings, she followed me with a smile.

Arriving at a corner of a hallway, Kushida waited for me to talk.

“Congratulations, Kushida. You have been selected as an ambassador. Please provide your assistance for the good of the class.”

“Eeto? Sorry, what do you mean?”

I explained to her about the study group we wanted to make to help Sudou.

Of course, I also mentioned the fact that Horikita would be teaching.

“I was thinking you could use this study group to get closer to Horikita.”

“I want to get closer to her... but I’m not worrying about that right now, you know? After all, it’s natural to help out a friend. So I’ll help.”

This girl, she’s too nice... It looks like she wanted to prevent Ike, Sudou, and the others from being expelled.

“Are you really ok with it? If you don’t want to, I don’t want to force you.”



"Ah, sorry. I didn't pause because I don't want to help. Rather... I was happy."

Kushida leaned against the wall and lightly kicked the hallway.

“It’s cruel to kick people out because of bad grades. After everyone became friends at great pains, isn’t it sad that we have to say goodbye? When Hirata-kun decided to start a study group, I felt great admiration. But Horikita-san has been observing her surroundings better than I have. She saw Sudou-kun and his friends, after all. It looks like Horikita-san is starting to see the class as her friends. I’ll do anything to help everyone!”

Holding my hand, Kushida sent me smile. Uwa, she’s way too cute!

But it’s not a situation where I should be happy. Trying to look normal, I pretend to be calm.

“Then, I will rely on you. You are a very big help.”

There’s no one that wouldn’t fall for her after seeing her smile.

“Oh, but can I also ask for a favor? I want to participate in the study group too.”

“Ha? You really want to?”

“Un. I also want to study together with everyone.”

Everything worked out as I wanted it to. If Kushida’s there, the study group would probably be comforted by her presence. However, since Kushida has good grades, she has no reason to be there.

“Well then, when do we start?”

“Planning on starting tomorrow, more or less.”

I added “Horikita is, at least” in my minded.

“Is that so? Then I guess I have to talk to everyone by the end of today. I’ll contact you later, ok?”

“Oh, should I tell you the contact addresses of Sudou and the others?”

“It’s ok~. I already have their contacts. The only ones I don’t have are Horikita-san’s and your contact address...”

I didn’t know that... I mean the second part.

“Are you two already dating?”

"W-where'd that question come from. Horikita and I are friends... no, just neighbors."

"It's become a big rumor among the girls, you know? Horikita's always alone, right? But only Ayanokouji-kun gets along with her. You two also eat together, after all."

Umu, so the girls that saw us together have started rumors about us, I see.

"It's too bad, but that kind of sweet story between me and Horikita doesn't exist."

"Then there's no problem, right? Please exchange contact addresses with me."

"Sure."

With that, I got the contact address of another girl.

4

At midnight, as I was lazing around in my room, I received a text message. It was from Kushida.

"Yamauchi-kun and Ike-kun said OK~ (^•ω•^)b "

"Quick!"

Ike instantly rejected me with a wave of his hand when I asked him... The presence of a girl is clearly a big factor concerning boys. It's like they hold infinite power.

"I just contacted Sudou-kun too, and I think he'll agree too (^ω^)"

I received another mail. Oh~. At this pace, everyone will really meet up tomorrow.

At this faster than expected development, I contacted Horikita with the news. I sent her a mail about how I was working with Kushida, that Ike and Yamauchi agreed to come, and how Kushida would also be participating in the study group."

"Well, time to take a bath."

As soon as I got up from my bed, I got a call from Horikita.

“Moshi moshi?”[1]

“... I don’t understand your text.”

“What do you mean, you don’t understand. Isn’t it concise and simple? It looks like all three will come tomorrow.”

“Not that. The part where you said Kushida-san was helping. This is my first time hearing that.”

“I asked her earlier. For someone like Kushida who puts great effort in helping her classmates, she’d want to participate regardless of whether or not I invited her. In short, Sudou, Ike, and Yamauchi are coming. Ok?”

“I don’t remember allowing that. She didn’t even get a failing score either.”

“Hey—by introducing Kushida into our plan, the chances of success go way up. I just took the simplest measure of increasing the probability of success.”

“... I’m still not pleased with it. Shouldn’t you have done that after asking for my approval?”

“I know that you hate someone as proactive as Kushida is. However, it’s to make sure that no one fails. Or do you want to try gathering all students who failed by yourself?”

“Thats...”

Looks like Horikita understood that getting Kushida on board was a good thing.

Because she has too much pride in herself, it’s difficult for her to simply agree.

“We also don’t have much time until the test. Is it not ok?”

Speaking of which, Horikita doesn’t have much breathing room for her plan to work. But still, she was caught up on something and didn’t say anything. It was silent for a while.

“... Fine. We can’t do anything without making a sacrifice. However, Kushida-san will only help gather the students that failed. I can’t agree to her

participating in the study group.”

“... No, why is that? That was her condition for helping out. You’re being unreasonable.

“I won’t accept her participating in the study group. That won’t change.”

“Is this about that? Are you trying to get back at her for when we deceived you?”

“That’s unrelated. She didn’t fail her mock test. Having extra people will only result in extra effort and confusion.”

Her explanations are pretty reasonable, but I don’t understand the reason as to why she refuses to let Kushida join the study group.

“Do you just hate Kushida?”

“Do you not feel uncomfortable when you are next to someone you hate?”

“Huh?”

I didn’t understand what she meant.

Kushida tried to understand and get to know Horikita more than anyone, and tries to become her friend.

I never thought that Horikita actually hated Kushida.

“What if they decide to not come because Kushida’s not coming?”

“... Sorry, reviewing the test material is taking longer than I thought it would. I’m going to end the phone call because it’s taking so long. Well, good night.”

“H-hey!”

She quickly cut the call. A misanthrope would probably do the same. However, in order to rise up to class A, it’s necessary to compromise. (T/N always think of Hamilton when it says rise up) I plugged in my phone, put it on the table, then lied down on my bed.

I thought back on the days since the entrance ceremony.

“Defective products, huh.”

On the first day of school, that’s what the second-year senpais said to us.

In English, that would be “Defective product”.[2]

That’s what they used to ridicule the students of class D. The flawless Horikita probably has some problems too. I could somehow understand what she was saying today.

“What should I do...”

Should I try to force her? However, Horikita might leave in the worst case.

If Horikita didn’t teach, everyone’s time would go to naught.

Feeling heavy, I called Kushida’s number.

“Moshi moshi~”

At first, I could hear the strong wind in the background. It quickly died away though.

“By any chance, were you drying your hair?”

“Oh, did you hear that? I just finished, so it’s fine.”

Kushida just got out of the bath, huh... wait, it’s not the time to be having these delusions.

“No, uh, I have some bad news... Can you make it so that I never asked you to gather the failed students?”

“... Um, why?”

She answered after a short pause. It seems like she wants to know the reason, rather than getting mad immediately.

“Sorry. I can’t talk about it at length. Anyway, it got a bit difficult.”

“Is that so... I see that Horikita-san really doesn’t like me.”

I didn’t think I implied that at all, but it seems like Kushida picked up on it over the phone.

“It’s not related to her. It’s my mistake.”

“It’s fine if you don’t try to hide it~. I won’t get mad. I thought she would reject me because it looks like she doesn’t like me. It just happened as I thought it would.”

I guess you can call it woman's intuition.

"Anyway, it's my bad that I asked you to help."

"Uun, there's no need for you to apologize. But... ? I don't think that Horikita-san can gather Sudou and the others by herself."

I couldn't deny that.

"Hey, what did Horikita-san say, though? Was she against me gathering the others? Or was she against me participating in the study group?"

She got it perfectly right, as if she was listening to the conversation too.

"... The latter. Sorry for spoiling the mood."

"Ahahaha, yea. There's no need for you to apologize, though. She has a 'Don't get close to me' kind aura. So I expected it to happen anyway."

Even so, you're really perceptive.

"But everyone agreed to join because I said I would also participate... Before inviting me, couldn't you have lied that I wouldn't be able to participate? If you told them now, everyone would probably hate Horikita-san..."

I feel a bit frightened towards Kushida. She understands everything.

"Can you leave this one to me?"

"Leave this one to you?"

"Tomorrow, I'll take everyone to Horikita-san. Of course, I'll go too."

"That's—"

"It's fine, right?" Or can you solve the problem? Is there a way to gather everyone without me, or a way to convince Horikita?"

It's too bad, but that's impossible.

"... I got it. I'll leave it to you. I won't know what will happen, though."

"That's fine. You won't be responsible for any of it, after all. Well, see you tomorrow then."

The phone call ended. I never thought that I'd get more tired than I was after the phone call with Horikita. She said that it was fine, but is it really?

Horikita will insult and taunt anything she's not pleased with, no matter who is on the receiving end. It's clear that this precarious situation will end up in flames. Feeling anxious, I headed towards the bathroom.

Let's stop thinking about tomorrow—it'll only make me more depressed.

No matter how worried I get, tomorrow will come and go. Things will work out somehow.

5

Horikita was sullen in the morning. It would be great if she cutely puffed up her cheeks and cutely hit a boy's chest when she pouted.

I say that, but she's completely expressionless and silent. She doesn't even acknowledge my existence.

But if I turned my back to her, she might take out her compass... School ended and then it was after school.

“Did everyone gather for the study group?”

The first words she said to me were about the study group. She also spoke in a way that heavily implied something.

“...Kushida will bring them. I wonder if they'll participate.”

“Kushida's bringing them, huh. Did you tell her properly that she's not allowed to participate?”

Horikita headed to the library with those confident words. As I was about to walk out of the classroom, I looked at Kushida, who returned a cute wink.

Securing a corner of a long table near the edge of the library, we waited for the students.

“I brought them~!”

Kushida came to where we were waiting. Behind her was—

“We heard about the study group from Kushida-chan. I don't want to drop out that quickly after school. Please take care of us.”

Ike, Yamauchi, and Sudou. However, there was one unexpected visitor. A boy named Okitani.

“Okitani, you also got a red mark?

“Ah, uh, no. I was worried because I was right on the border... am I... not allowed to join? It's a bit difficult to join Hirata-kun's group...”

Okitani looked up at me with slightly red cheeks. Slender frame, blue hair, and a short-bob hairstyle. A boy weak to girls would immediately shout “I'm in love~!” If he wasn't a boy, it would be dangerous.

“It's fine if Okitani-kun joins, right?”

Kushida asked Horikita. His score was a 39 after all, so it's natural for him to be worried.

“If it's a student worried about getting red marks, then it's fine. But you have to be diligent.”

“O-ok.”

Okitani sat down happily. Kushida tried to sit down next to him, but Horikita noticed.

“Kushida-san. Did Ayanokouji-kun not tell you? You're—”

“To be honest, I'm also worried about getting bad grades.”

“You... you didn't get bad tests on that last test.”

“Well, that was luck. There were a lot of multiple choice questions. So for about half of them, I guessed. In truth, I barely passed.”

Kushida cutely scratched her cheek while saying “Ehehe”.

“I think I'm about the same level as Okitani-kun, if not worse. So I want to participate in the study group to avoid a bad grade. That's fine, right?”

I couldn't hide my surprise at Kushida's bold and unexpected plan. After confirming that Okitani could join, she turned the tables. Horikita couldn't help but to let her join.

“... Fine.”

"Thanks!"

Kushida bowed to Horikita with a smile. Bringing Okitani was probably a part of her plan too. She used him as justification for her to join.

"Below 32 is a red mark. Then is 32 points also a failing grade?"

"If it's 'below', then 32 points is safe. Sudou, can you even make that?"

Even Ike is worried about Sudou. Of course these guys would like to know if it's "below" or "up to".

"It doesn't matter either way. My goal is to make everyone here get at least 50 points."

"Geh, isn't that too hard for us?"

"It's dangerous to just aim for the bare minimum. You guys, who aren't even at the mark, are really troubling."

At Horikita's sound argument, the group of failures reluctantly agreed.

"I was able to summarize most of the topics that will be covered on this test. I plan to thoroughly cover these topics in the next two weeks. If you have any questions that you don't know, ask me."

"... Hey, I don't even understand the first problem."

Sudou scowled at Horikita. I also read the question.

"A, B, and C have 2150 yen collectively. A has 120 yen more than B does. After C gives B $\frac{2}{5}$ ths of his money, B now has 220 yen more than A. How much money did A originally have?"

A problem involving system of equations. For a high school student, it should be a free point.

"Try using your brain. If you give up from the very beginning, you won't get anywhere."

"Even if you say that... I don't even know how to study."

"Everyone else in the school passed."

The school doesn't decide on admissions solely based on scores. Sudou was

probably accepted because of his high physical ability. If you think about it, wouldn't he get kicked out immediately because of his bad grades?

"Ugh, I don't know either..."

Ike was also puzzled as he scratched his head.

"Okitani-kun, do you know how to do this question?"

"Um... A+B+C equals 2150 yen, and A equals B+120..."

Okitani, who somehow avoided failing the last test, started writing down the equations.

Kushida was looking over his shoulder.

"Un un, that's right, that's right. And then?"

Kushida is certainly bold. Even though she said she was worried about getting a failing mark, she was teaching Okitani.

"Honestly speaking, this problem can be easily solved by first-year and second-year middle school students. If you fail here, you won't be able to do anything."

"Are we elementary school students then...?"

"As Horikita-san said, it's pretty bad if you can't solve these problems. The first few math problems on the test were about this hard, but even I didn't know how to do the last problem."

"I can teach you how to do systems of equations if you want."

Horikita picked up her pen without hesitating. It's pitiful, but the only ones who understood how to do the problem were Kushida and Okitani.

"In the first place, what even is this 'system of equations' thing...?"

"... Are you serious?"

Wow, these guys really live without studying at all. Sudou threw his mechanical pencil at his desk.

"No, stop. This isn't going to work."

Before even starting, Sudou already gave up.

Looking at his pitiful state, Horikita was fuming.

"E-everyone, wait. Let's try our best. If you learn how to solve these problems, you can apply your knowledge to the questions on the test. Ok?"

"... Well, if Kushida-chan says so, we'll try our best, but... If Kushida-chan taught it to us, I would probably work even harder."

"U-um..."

Horikita stayed silent when Kushida was about to ask her. It was troubling that she didn't say anything. However, if she stayed silent, the others might give up on studying. Kushida made up her mind and picked up the mechanical pencil.

"This is, as Horikita-san said, a problem that uses systems of equations. I'll write down what I said as expressions."

As she said that, she wrote down the three equations. It looks like they're trying their best, but even if she wrote down the equations and showed it to them, they probably don't understand. Rather than a study group, this is more like detention. They don't get her explanation.

"So, the answer is 710 yen. Do you get it?"

Feeling satisfied, Kushida smiled and looked at Sudou.

"... Uh, then can you answer this question? Why?"

"Uu..."

She finally realized. They didn't follow her explanation.

"I'm not trying to deny you, but you guys are way too stupid and incompetent."

The silent Horikita spoke up.

"I'm scared for the future if you can't solve this problem."

"So what. This has nothing to do with you."

Feeling irritated at Horikita's words, Sudou hit the desk.

"It has nothing to do with me. No matter how much you suffer, it doesn't

affect me. It's just that I feel pity for you. I guess I've been running away from painful things all my life."

"Say what you want to say clearly. Studying's useless in the future anyway."

"Studying is useless in the future? An interesting argument. What makes you say that?"

"Even if I don't know how to solve this kind of problem, I won't have any trouble. Studying is unnecessary. Rather than sticking to a textbook, aiming to become a basketball pro is much more useful for the future."

"That's wrong. If you learn how to solve that problem, your whole life will be changed. In other words, if you study, you'll have less trouble. It's the same thing for basketball. I wonder if you've been playing basketball to your own convenient rules. Do you run away from difficult things just like you do while studying? From the looks of it, it doesn't seem like you practice seriously. That's the kind of personality you have. If I was the advisor of the club, I wouldn't let you be a regular."

"Tsu!"

Sudou stood up and grabbed Horikita by her collar.

"Sudou-kun!"

Even faster than I could react, Kushida stood up and grabbed Sudou's arm.

Horikita raised her eyebrows and stayed calm.

"I have no interest in you, but I can understand what kind of person you are. You want to become a basketball pro? Do you think that kind of childish wish can simply become true in this society? A half-hearted person like you who gives up easily can never become a pro. Furthermore, even if you become a pro, I don't think you'd be able to get a sufficient annual income. You're a fool for setting your sights on such a idealized job."

"You...!"

It's clear that Sudou is on the brink of losing his control. If he raised his fist, I'll also have to jump out and hold him back.

"Can you just give up on studying, no, school? And then you can give up on

your dreams to become a basketball pro and live a pitiful life working a part time job.”

“Ha... that’s just fine. I’m giving up. It’s not because it’s too difficult for me. I took a day off from my club activities, but it was a complete waste of time. Bye!”

“You’re saying some strange things. Studying is difficult.”

Horikita shot him a final blow. If Kushida weren’t there, Sudou probably would’ve hit Horikita. Not hiding his irritation, he stuffed his textbook into his bag.

“Hey, is this ok?”

“Doesn’t matter. For someone who’s indifferent... it’s pointless to care about someone like that. Even though expulsion is at stake. He doesn’t have an ounce of determination to stay in school.”

“I thought it was strange for someone like you who has no friends to invite people to a study group. At best, you brought us over here to call us stupid. If you weren’t a girl, I’d hit you.”

“You just don’t have the courage to hit me, right? Don’t use my gender as a reason.”

The study group started moments ago, but it was already crumbling.

“I also quit. Even though a small part of it is because I can’t study... most of it’s because I’m irritated. Horikita-san may be smart, but that doesn’t mean you’re above us.”

Losing his patience, Ike also gave up.

“I don’t care whether or not you drop out of school, so do as you like.”

“Well, I’ll pull an all-nighter for that.”

“Interesting. Aren’t you here because you can’t study?”

“Tsu...”

Even for the usually upbeat Ike, Horikita’s thorny words made him stiffen. And then Yamauchi also started packing up. Finally, the worried Okitani also stood

up, unable to go against the flow.

"E-everyone... Is this really ok?"

"Let's go, Okitani."

Ike left the library with the hesitant Okitani.

The only ones remaining were me and Kushida. Even Kushida would probably leave soon.

"... Horikita-san, why didn't you stop anyone from leaving...?"

"I was mistaken. Even if I got these guys to barely pass, this situation would repeat. And then they'd give up again. I finally realized that this was a waste of time and effort.

"What do you mean by that...?"

"I'm saying that it's good to throw away all unnecessary trash now."

If the students with low grades weren't here, then there would be no labor needed to teach them, and the average would also increase. She came to that conclusion.

"So that was it... H-hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Do you also think the same way?"

"If Horikita concluded that, then isn't it fine?"

"A-ayanokouji-kun, do you think that?'

"Well, I don't want them to quit, but since I'm not the one teaching them, I can't do anything about it. In the end, I have a similar opinion to Horikita."

"... I see."

With a dark expression, Kushida got her bag and stood up.

"I'm going to do something about this. I don't want everyone to separate so quickly."

"Kushida-san. Are those your true intentions?"

"... Is that bad? I can't just abandon Sudou-kun, Ike-kun, and Yamauchi-kun."

"It doesn't matter whether or not you say those are your true intentions. I don't think that you truly want to help them."

"What are you talking about? I don't know what you mean. Why do you make enemies with your cold words without hesitation? That's... That's sad."

Kushida hung her head.

"... See you two tomorrow."

After those short words, Kushida also left. In a flash, we were back to the two of us. The library was completely silent.

"That was troubling. With that, the study group is over."

"Looks that way."

The library's silence felt ominous.

"Only you understood me. I guess you're a bit better than those worthless fools. If you need me to teach you something right now, I can do it."

"I'll decline."

"Are you returning home?"

"Sudou and the others are heading there. I'll go chat with them."

"There's no worth in talking to people who will drop out soon like them."

"I'm just simply trying to talk to my friends."

"How selfish. Calling them friends while you sit back and watch them get kicked out. From my point of view, that looks like the most cruel thing you can do."

Well, I can't deny that. She didn't say anything wrong.

In the end, studying is all about how well someone can motivate themselves.

"I'm not going to say you're wrong. I also understand why you'd call someone who doesn't like to study like Sudou stupid. But Horikita, isn't it also important to imagine Sudou's circumstances? If he was only aiming to become a basketball pro, then there's not much for him at this school. Don't you want to see why he chose this school?"

"... Not interested."

Brushing away my words, Horikita continued to look down at her textbook.

Leaving the library, I chased after Kushida. I wanted to thank her and apologize to her about the study group. Besides, I want to get along with cute girls, you know?

Taking out my phone enthusiastically, I looked through my address book for Kushida's name. It's only my second time, so I'm nervous to contact her. I heard the phone ring two, three times.

However, there's no sign that she's picking up. Did she not notice? Or is she ignoring me?

She wasn't in sight, so I ran around, looking for her. Inside the school building, I saw someone that looked like Kushida from the back. It was around 6 o'clock, so there was no one other than club members. Well, there's also the possibility that Kushida is meeting one of her friends that's in a club.

I'll chase after her; if she's meeting up with someone, I can talk to her at a later date. Time to go inside.

Getting my indoor shoes from the rack, I headed for the hallway, but didn't see Kushida. Did I lose sight of her? I thought that, but I heard the faint sounds of someone's shoes.

I arrived at the stairs leading to the second floor. Still following her. I heard the footsteps above me, going to the third floor. The next floor is the rooftop, no? It's open during lunchtime, but I believe that it's locked after school. Feeling curious, I went up the stairs. I hid my presence in case she was meeting with someone. And then I stopped in the middle of the stairs.

I could see the outline of someone up there.

Leaning against the handrail, I peeked through the crack in the door. As I looked through the opening, I saw Kushida's figure. There was no one else. Is she waiting for someone here?

If she's waiting for someone in the deserted place... perhaps, is Kushida meeting up a boyfriend? In that case, there's a possibility that I would be cornered from both sides. As I was wondering whether or not I should leave,

Kushida put down her bag on the floor.

And then—

“Ah— so annoying.”

Her voice was so low that I didn’t think that it was Kushida.

“It’s really annoying, irritating. It’d be fine if she just died...”

She was grumbling to herself as if she was saying some kind of spell or curse.

“I hate those kind of stuck-up girls that think they’re cute. Why is she such a bitch? A girl like her can’t possibly teach me how to study.”

Is Kushida annoyed with... Horikita?

“Ah— the worst. She’s really the worst, the worst, the worst. Horikita’s annoying, annoying, so annoying!”

I feel like the image of the class’ most popular girl has been burned down. It was a figure that she didn’t want seen by anyone else. My brain told me that it was dangerous to stay here.

However, a question arose. Regardless of the fact that she was hiding her true feelings, why did she agree to help me if she hates Horikita? I thought that she would know enough about Horikita’s personality and character. She could’ve refused to help, leave the study group to Horikita, or have done countless other actions to take her hands off the issue.

Why would she force herself to participate in the study group? Did she want to get along with Horikita? Or did she want to get closer to someone participating?

None of those make sense. With that much stress, if there isn’t a different reason as to why she participated, I can’t explain it.

No... She might’ve showed signs of this from the very beginning.

I never thought much about it, but looking at the state she’s in right now, I had a thought. By any chance, are Kushida and Horikita— Anyway, I should get away from here. Kushida probably wouldn’t want anyone else to see her like this. Hiding my presence, I tried to quickly leave.

Thump!

In the school at dusk, the sound of kicking the door was louder than I thought. Unexpectedly loud. Kushida, also hearing the sound, immediately tensed up and stopped breathing. As if someone called out to her, Kushida turned around and spotted me.

“... What are you... doing here?”

After a brief silence, Kushida asked in a cold voice.

“I lost my way, My bad, my bad. I’ll leave now.”

Kushida kept looking at me, seeing through my obvious lie. She had an intense gaze I’d never seen before.

“Did you hear...?”

“Will you believe me if I said I didn’t?”

“I see...”

Kushida briskly walked down the stairs. She put her left forearm against my neck and pushed me against the wall.

Her tone of voice and behavior wasn’t the Kushida I knew.

The Kushida now had a scary look that I couldn’t help but compare to Horikita’s.

“What you heard just now... if you speak a word of it to anyone, I won’t forgive you.”

That sounded like a threat.

“And if I did?”

“Then I’ll spread a rumor that you raped me up here.”

“That’s a false charge, you know.”

“That’s ok, since it’s not a false charge.”

There was a strong impact to her words.

Kushida then grabbed my left wrist and slowly opened the palm of my hand. She held the back of my hand and put my palm on her breast.

The feeling of her soft breasts was transmitted throughout my whole palm.

“... What are you doing?”

At her unexpected behavior, I tried to pull away, but she pushed back on my hand.

“Your fingerprints are on my clothes. There’s evidence. I’m being serious. Get it?”

“... I understand. I got it, so let go of my hand.”

“I’m going to leave this uniform in my room without washing it. If you tell anyone, I’m going to give this to the police.”

For a while, I glared at Kushida as she kept my hand on her breasts.

“Don’t forget.”

Making sure that I understood, Kushida stepped away from me.

I somehow couldn’t remember the feeling even though it was my first time touching a girl’s breasts.

“Hey, Kushida. Which one is the ‘real’ you?”

“... That has nothing to do with you.”

“Is that so... However, watching you made me realize something. If you hate Horikita, then there’s no need to involve yourself with her, right?”



I didn't mean to ask that. I knew that she probably wouldn't answer. But I was curious as to why she went so far to befriend her.

"Is it bad to try to be liked by everyone? Do you understand how hard that is? You don't, right?"

"I don't have too many friends, so no, I can't say I do."

Ever since the first day, Kushida certainly made an effort to talk to, exchange contact addresses with, and invite a pessimistic and negative girl. Anyone can imagine how time-consuming and hard that would be.

"Like Horikita... I wanted to at least look like I got along with Horikita-san."

"But you were stressed, huh."

"Yea. That's my way of life. That way, I can feel my own real significance."

She answered without hesitation. Kushida has feelings and rules that only she herself knows. That's what she was saying. Following her own rules, she frantically tried over and over to get along with Horikita.

"I'm telling you this because of the circumstances, but I really hate gloomy and plain boys like you."

My image of the cute Kushida has been shattered, but I'm not really shocked. People tend to have both public and private images, after all.

However, Kushida's answer felt like it had both truths and lies.

"This is just my intuition, but were you and Horikita acquaintances? Before coming to this school."

When I said that, Kushida's shoulder flinched for a split second.

"What the... I don't know what you mean. Did Horikita-san say something about me?"

"No, I thought that it was your first time meeting her. It's funny, though."

"... Funny?"

I remembered the first time Kushida talked to me.

"When I was introducing myself, you instantly remembered my name, no?"

Kushida asked in reply, "So what?"

"Where did you hear Horikita's name from? At that time, she hadn't told her

name to anybody. The only one who knew was Sudou, but I doubt you met Sudou then."

In other words, she shouldn't have had the chance to learn her name.

"Also, you probably got close to me so you could keep tabs on her, right?"

"Just shut up. I'm getting irritated from listening to you talk. I only want to say one thing. Do you swear that you won't say a word of what you learned here?"

"I promise. Even if I told anyone, no one would believe me, right?"

Kushida is really trusted by the class. A difference of heaven and earth between us.

"... Ok. I believe you."

Although she didn't change her expression, Kushida closed her eyes and exhaled deeply.

"Is there anyone that would even believe me?"

I accidentally blurted out those words.

"Horikita-san's kind of unusual, right?"

"Well, I'd say she's really unusual."

"She's not affected by anyone, nor does she involve herself with other people. The exact opposite of me."

Kushida and Horikita are really two opposite poles.

"You know, she only opens herself up to you."

"Wait. Let me make a quick revision. She doesn't open herself up. Absolutely not."

"... Probably. Even so, she trusts you the most. Out of everyone I know, she has the most confidence in herself and the most wariness towards others. She wouldn't trust anyone who's worthless and stupid."

"You're saying she has a good eye for people, right?"

"That's the reason I said I believed you. After all, you're pretty apathetic towards others, right?"

I don't remember showing Kushida that kind of behavior, but she seemed to have confidence in her words.

"It's not like it's that strange to say. You showed absolutely no signs of giving your seat up to the old woman, right?"

I see, that's what she's talking about. She noticed us on the bus. And then she realized that we weren't even thinking of giving up our seats.

"If you believed me, then don't spread pointless rumors like that."

"If you had that much confidence before, you wouldn't have had the chance to feel my breasts."

"Thats—I was really confused there. I panicked..."

Her facial expression softened, and changed to one of impatience.

"So, can I think of you as a bitch that would let boys touch your breasts without any hesitation?"

She kicked my thigh with all her strength. In a panic, I took hold of the railing.

"Dangerous! I could've gotten injured!"

"That's because you said something stupid!"

With a flushed face (from anger, not bashfulness), Kushida snapped at me.

"Hey, wait for a bit."

I gave her a small nod.

Going back up the stairs, Kushida quickly got her bag and came back. She had a wide grin on her face.

"Shall we go back together?"

"S-sure."

I wondered whether this was a bad dream as her attitude did a complete 180. It was the usual Kushida. In the end, I couldn't tell which one was the real her.

I wonder how class D will be starting from tomorrow. It felt like I was watching some kind of variety show. A message from the group chat came.

It read, "Satou has joined the group." She's one of the hyper girls in our class.

"Yahoo~ Ike-kun invited me while I was talking to him earlier."

Having nothing to say, I did nothing and kept looking at the chat.

"I heard about what happened today~. Isn't Horikita really annoying?"

"I was pissed off at her. Sudou was really angry at her too. Looked like he would hit her."

"If I see her tomorrow, I'm going to hit her. I was really angry today."

"Ahahaha, it'll become a big problem if you hit her LOL that's just overkill"

"Hey, while we're on the topic. Wanna ignore her starting from tomorrow?"

"Nah, we've always ignored her (lol)"

"I need to get back at her somehow. We can bully her and make her cry. Like hiding her shoes."

"I would laugh if I was a kid, but I really want to see her suffer."

Somehow, Horikita became the main topic of the group chat.

"Ayanakouji-kun, wanna join too? In bullying her haha"

"Nah, he's fallen too hard for her."

"Hey, whose side are you on?"

It was pretty obvious that everyone would be irritated at Horikita. Their experiences with her have always been negative. However, I can't agree with hitting or bullying her. Both would be equally devoid of any good intentions.

"You're reading this, right? Hey, I asked you a question: which side are you on?"

"I'm not on anyone's side. I won't really stop you guys."

"Staying neutral. The most sly answer possible lol"

"You can think of it however you want, but it's your loss if you think about it."

If the school learns of this problem, it'll become trouble for you. Just keep that in mind."

"Are you trying to protect her? Haha"

Because I can't see their faces over chat, it makes them more aggressive than usual. If Ike was in front of me, he probably wouldn't have said those words.

However, everyone just wants a sense of security and solidarity using Horikita.

It would only be a waste of time if I continued chatting. Time to finish this conversation.

"If Kushida knew of this, she'd hate you. lol"

After sending that message, I closed my phone. It rang, but I left it alone. They probably won't do anything stupid. Satou wouldn't do anything stupid without the cooperation of the others.

Moving over to the side of the room, I opened the window. I could hear the insects from the nearby trees. Is it the Kubikirigisu that are making that noise? The night breeze shook the window back and forth.[3]

I met Horikita on the first day of school, was put in the same class, and got the seat next to her. I became friends with Sudou and Ike. Furthermore, I fell for the school's trap and our class was labeled as the worst. Horikita, who tried to fix our situation, earned the ire of the other students because of her personality.

I'm the closest one to this situation, but I feel like I'm floating instead.

No, that's a bad choice of words. It's not a comfortable feeling. However, I feel like I'm observing from the outside. Because I didn't feel the same urgency as Sudou and the others did, I thought that the current situation didn't relate to me and ignored it instead.

"Only a fool would not use power that they have."

I didn't want to remember his words, but they were stuck in my head.

"A fool... I wonder if that's what I am."

Closing the window, I could hear the harsh laughter coming from the

television.

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I couldn't seem to fall asleep, so I got up and exited my room.

In the lobby, I bought some juice from the vending machine and went back to the elevator.

"Hmm?"

The elevator was on the 7th floor. Feeling curious, I looked at the CCTV monitor of the inside of the elevator. It was Horikita in her school uniform.

"... Well, there's no need to hide myself, but..."

I didn't want to particularly face her, so I hid myself behind the vending machine. The elevator reached the first floor.

While being wary of her surroundings, Horikita exited the building. After she disappeared into the dark, I chased after her.

However, I involuntarily hid myself again after turning the corner.

Horikita stopped moving. There was another person's figure.

"Suzune. I didn't think you'd follow me all the way here."

Did she leave at this hour to meet with a boy?

"Mou, I'm different from the useless me that you know. I've come here to catch up to you."

"Catch up to me, huh."

Nii-san? I couldn't see the person she was talking to, but it looks like it's Horikita's older brother.

"I heard that you are in class D; it doesn't seem like anything's changed in the last 3 years. Because you've always been looking at my back, you've never been able to see your own flaws. Choosing to come to this school was another one of your mistakes."

"That's—that's wrong. I'm going to rise up to class A. And then—"

"That's impossible. You'll never reach class A. Rather, your class will crumble before that. This school isn't as easy as you think it is."

"I will absolutely, absolutely reach class A..."

"I already said it's impossible. You're a really unreasonable younger sister."

Horikita's older brother takes a step forward. From my hiding spot, I could see his form more clearly.

It was the student council president.

There was no emotion in his expression, as if he was looking at an existence that didn't interest him at all.

He grabbed his younger sister's wrist and pushed her against the wall.

"No matter how much I avoided you, you are still my younger sister. If people start to learn about you, it is me who will be disgraced. Leave this school immediately."

"N-no... tsu. I will, I will absolutely rise up to class A...!"

"Foolish, really. Do you want to relive the painful experiences of the past?"

"Nii-san—I will—"

"You have neither the power nor the qualifications to aim for class A. Understand that."

Horikita's body drew forward, as if he was about to take action. The situation looks dangerous.

Resigning myself to her anger, I stepped out from my corner and approached the older brother.

Before I realized, I grabbed his right arm.

"—What? Who are you?"

Looking at his own arm, he looked at me with a sharp glint in his eyes.

"A-ayanokouji-kun!?"

"You, you were trying to throw her to the ground, right? It's concrete here, you know. Just because you're siblings doesn't mean you can do anything you

want."

"It's not admirable to eavesdrop."

"Just let go of her hand."

"That's what I should be saying."

It was silent while we glared at each other.

"Stop, Ayanokouji-kun..."

She said with a strained voice. I've never seen her like that before.

Reluctantly, I let go of his arm. At that moment, he aimed for my face with a quick backhand.

Feeling danger, I instinctively leaned backwards. A nasty attack with a thin body. Furthermore, he aimed for my vitals with a sharp kick.



“Ha!”

I understood that it had power to make me lose consciousness in one hit.

With a confused look, he let out a breath and extended his right arm towards me.

If I grabbed his hand, he would probably throw me onto the ground. Instead, I slapped his arm away with left hand.

“Good reflexes. I didn’t think you would avoid every single one. You also understood what I was trying to do. Were you taught in some way?”

Finally stopping his attacks, he asked me a question.

“Yea, I did piano and calligraphy. In elementary school, I even got the championship in a music competition.”

“Are you also class D? What a unique boy. Suzune.”

Letting go of her arm, he slowly faced me.

“Suzune, you have a friend? I’m honestly surprised.”

“He’s... he’s not my friend. He’s only a classmate.”

Denying his words, she looked up to her brother.

“As always, you’re mistaking solitude with isolation. And you, Ayanokouji. With you, it looks like things are going to become interesting.”

Walking past me, he disappeared into the night. The confident student council president. It seems like Horikita was acting strange because she met her brother.

“I’m going to crawl my way to class A even if I die. That’s the only way.”

After he left, the night was engulfed in silence. Horikita sat down against the wall, her head hanging in shame. I wonder if I did anything unnecessary. As I turned to return to the dorms, Horikita called out to me.

“Did you hear everything...? Or was it coincidence?”

“No, it was like 50% luck. I saw you while I went to go buy juice from the vending machine. I followed you simply because I was curious. However, I really didn’t mean to intrude.”

Horikita sank into silence once again.

“Your older brother is quite strong. He didn’t hesitate to attack.”

“He’s... 5th dan in karate and 4th dan in aikido.”[4]

Oho, so he’s that strong. If I didn’t pull back it would’ve been a disaster.

“Ayanokouji-kun, you also do something, right? You’re also a rank holder.”

“I already said it, didn’t I? I played piano and performed tea ceremonies.”

“You said calligraphy before.”

“... I also did calligraphy.”

“You purposely got low scores on your test, and you say you did piano and calligraphy. I still don’t understand you very well.”

“Getting those scores were only a coincidence, and I really did piano, tea ceremony, and calligraphy.”

If there was a piano here, I could play Fur Elise at least.

“I let you see a strange side of me.”

“Rather, I always thought that you were a normal girl—not.”

She scowled at me.

“Let’s go back. If anyone sees us here, there will surely be a misunderstanding.”

Certainly. There would absolutely be strange rumors about a girl and a boy all by themselves in the dead of night.

Not to mention, our relationship was still iffy to begin with.

Slowly getting up, Horikita walked towards the entrance of the dorms.

“Hey... Are you really ok with how the study group went?”

Thinking that I wouldn’t get another chance, I called out to her resolutely.

“Why are you asking that? I proposed the study group in the first place. It’s not like you cared about it in the first place. Am I wrong?”

“I have a bad feeling. Or should I say, the other students seem to be planning something.”

“I don’t mind. I’m already used to it. Also, most of the students with red marks are with Hirata-kun. He’s good at studying, gets along with people, and can teach other people well, unlike me. This time, they should be able to barely clear the borderline. However, I judged it to be a waste of time to help them out myself. Until graduation, they’ll have to repeatedly try to not fail. It’d be really stupid to keep trying to cover for their failing marks every single time.”

“Sudou and his group took some distance from Hirata. I don’t think they’ll participate in his study group.”

“That’s what they decided to do; that has nothing to do with me. If they don’t approach Hirata-kun, they’ll just drop out soon enough. Of course, my goal is to get up to class A. However, that’s for my own sake, and not for anyone else. I don’t care what anyone else does. Rather, if cut down on people on this next midterm, only people who are necessary are left. It’ll be easier to get to class A. A win-win situation.”

I don’t think she’s wrong. In the first place, this crisis is bad for students who got red marks. However, I couldn’t help but continue the conversation with Horikita, who was strangely talkative.

“Horikita, isn’t that way of thinking incorrect?”

“Incorrect? Tell me which part is wrong. You’re not trying to say that there is no future for a person who abandons their classmates, right?”

“Calm down. I know you well enough that you wouldn’t understand what I’m saying.”

“Then why? There’s no merit in saving failures.”

“Certainly there isn’t much merit. However, it helps prevent demerits.”

“... Demerits?”

“Do you think that the school hasn’t already thought of that? They’re students who rack up negative points from talking during class or always being late. Say they drop out because no one helped them. How many negative points do you think we’ll get?”

“That’s—”

“Of course, before we get any information, nothing is certain. However, don’t you think that there’s a fairly high possibility? A hundred? A thousand? There’s even a chance that 10,000 or 100,000 points are deducted. If that’s the case, you’ll have a hard time getting to class A.”

“Our negative points from being late and talking during class can’t go below 0 right now. While we’re at 0 points, it’d be best to remove all the students who can’t study. Isn’t it the same as receiving no damage?”

“There’s no guarantee that that’ll be the case. There might be some negative points that we don’t know about yet. Do you really think it’s alright to ignore such a dangerous risk? Well... for someone as smart as you, there’s no way that you wouldn’t have thought of that. If that wasn’t the case, there’s no reason for you to do a study group. You would’ve abandoned them from the very start.”

I was starting to get worked up. That might be because I started to regard her as a friend. I didn’t want her to regret her decision.

“Even if there are unseen minuses, it’s better for the class if we get rid of the failures. When we start to increase our points, it’ll be bad if we regret not cutting them out. At this time, this is a risk that should be taken.”

“Do you really think that?”

“Yes, really. Rather, I am worried about you, who is trying to desperately save them.”

I grabbed Horikita’s wrist as she was about to get on the elevator.

“What? Do you have a rebuttal? This problem isn’t something that can be solved by the two of us. The only ones who know the answer are the school, so we’ll be left here arguing forever. I’ll interpret it as I like, and you’ll do the same. It’ll only amount to that, no?”

“You’re really talkative. I never thought you were the type of person to talk this much.”

“That’s... that’s because you’re being insistent.”

The normal Horikita would never listen to me.

If I stopped her like this, it wouldn’t be strange to receive a sharp blow.

However, by not doing so, it's evidence that Horikita also thinks the same way. That's why she didn't shake off my hand. Of course, she herself probably doesn't notice.

"The day we met. Do you remember what happened on the bus?"

"You mean the time we refused to give our seat up to the old woman?"

"Yea. At that time, I thought of the meaning behind giving up my seat. To give up my seat, or not to give up my seat. Which one is the right answer?"

"I already gave my answer. I didn't give up my seat because I felt it was useless. There's no merit to giving her my seat, but rather a waste of time and effort."

"Merit? All you think about is profit and loss to the very end."

"Is that bad? Humans are calculating creatures. If you sell goods, you get money, and if you do someone a favor, it'll be returned. I'll receive this thing called 'joy' from my contribution to society if I give up my seat. No?"

"No, that's not wrong. I also think that's natural."

"Then—"

"With that mindset, make sure to have a broad outlook on life. Right now, you're too blinded by anger and unhappiness that you can't see anything."

"Are you someone important? Do you even have the ability to find faults about me?"

"Whatever my ability, I can only see one thing that you cannot see. This is the only fault in the otherwise perfect-looking person known as Horikita Suzune."

She snorted, as if she was saying "Tell me if you have a bone to pick with me."

"Let me tell me you your faults. You find other people a hindrance and you don't let anyone come close to you. Aren't you in class D because you always think of yourself as superior over everyone else?"

"... It seems like you're trying to say that I'm equal to Sudou-kun and his group."

"Then, are you trying to say that you're superior to those guys?"

"It's obvious if you look at the test scores. Those are clear evidence that they're just heavy baggage for the class."

"Certainly, if you measure by scores, they're two, three times below your level. Even if they tried really hard, they wouldn't be able to surpass you. However, that's only true on top of the desk. The school doesn't only look at intelligence. This time, if the school did some kind of physical examination, the results wouldn't be the same. Is that wrong?"

"That's—"

"Your physical ability is also good. After watching you swim, you're definitely one of the better girls. However, both you and I know that Sudou's physical abilities surpass yours. Ike has communication skills that you don't have. If there was a test based on communication skills, Ike would certainly be helpful. Rather, you would've probably dragged down the class. Well then, are you incompetent? No, that's not it. Everyone has their strong and weak points. That's what a human is."

Horikita tried to retort, but she wasn't able to say anything.

"... You have no basis to your words. All of your words are just pure guesses."

"If there is no foundation, then we have to come up with a guess from what we do have. Think about Chiyabashira-sensei's words carefully. In the guidance room, she said, "Who decided that smart people are the ones who get into superior classes?". So, the conclusion is that there is some factor other than academic ability that affects rankings."

I swiftly cut off Horikita's exit path as she looked left and right to weasel herself out of the argument. If I didn't do that, our argument would've been ridiculous.

"You say that you wouldn't regret abandoning the students who failed, but that's not true. There will be plenty of days where you feel regret if they drop out."

I looked straight into Horikita's eyes. She was not only grasping the reality of the situation, but also tied it with her consciousness. I got that impression from her.

"You're really talkative today too. Doesn't suit your principle of avoiding trouble."

"Yea, probably."

"It's really frustrating, but your words are right. You had enough persuasive power to make me think that. I'll recognize that. However, I still can't understand one thing. That is, your true intentions. What is this school to you? Why are you desperately trying to persuade me?"

"... I see, that's what you're thinking."

"If someone doesn't have any persuasive power, their theories won't be believed."

She wants to know why I'm trying to persuade her that letting Sudou and the others drop out is a bad thing.

"Without any facades, I want to know the true reason. For points? To rise up to class A? Or, to help your friends?"

"Because I want to know. What is 'a person with merit'? What is equality?"

"Merit, equality..."

"I came to this school to seek out answers to these questions."

Although it wasn't well organized in my head, it came out clearly in words.

"Your hand, can you let go?"

"Ah, my bad."

After I released my hand, Horikita turned around and looked at me.

"I couldn't have fallen for your smooth talking, right?"

Saying that, Horikita extended her arm towards me.

"I will take care of Sudou-kun and the others for my own sake. From now on, I'll make sure to make sure they don't drop out as an investment for the future. Is that fine?"

"Don't worry. I don't think you'll act differently. That's the kind of person you are."

"That's a promise, then."

I took Horikita's hand.

However, it wasn't until later that I learned that this was a contract with the devil.

1. Moshi moshi is the usual greeting for phone calls.
2. "Defective product" is in English.
3. A name of an insect. I couldn't find an English name, so I'll just use the Japanese name.
4. Dan are ranks in martial arts

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan_\(rank\)#Ranks_in_Japanese](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan_(rank)#Ranks_in_Japanese))

Chapter 8: The group of failures, attempt 2

The fragrance of the first tea of the season is now in the air. I hope all of you are doing well.

A month and a half since the start of school. I spent every day carefree.

“Excuse me, can you hear me? Is your head ok?”

She hit my forehead with her palm, and I rubbed it in pain.

“You don’t have a fever, huh.”

“I don’t! I was just lost in thought.”

I remembered how we reached this situation, and I involuntarily sighed. Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed to cooperate with her.

Oh well, no use crying over spilt milk.

At the time, I agreed to help to cheer her up, but thinking back on it, it’s really not like me to accept.

“So, Mr. Strategist. What should I do?”

“Well... of course, we need to persuade Sudou-kun and the others to participate in the study group again. To do that, you’ll have to grovel at your feet, begging them to join.”

“Why do I have to do that... In the first place, you’re the reason there was a fight.”

“The true reason is that they didn’t want to study. Don’t mistake that.”

This girl... Does she even want to help them?

“It’s impossible to gather them again without Kushida’s help. You know that too, right?”

“... I know. I guess we’ll have to make some sacrifices.”

Looks like she doesn’t want to be involved with Kushida in any way possible. Even though she wasn’t happy about it, she agreed since it was an emergency.

This is the best compromise possible for someone like Horikita who doesn't want her close.

"Alright, go and quickly get her to work with us."

"Me?"

"Of course. You formed a contract with me. Since you agreed to be my workhorse until we reach class A, you have to comply."

I don't remember making that kind of contract.

"Here, look at this written contract."

Wow. It had my name and even my seal.

"You'll be charged for document forgery, you know."

Giving up, I walked away from her. Horikita tidied up her desk and faced Kushida.

"Kushida-san. I want to talk to you. If possible, do you want to eat lunch together?"

"Lunch? It's strange to be invited by Horikita-san, but sure."

Even though I was nearby, Kushida didn't waver at all. She quickly agreed. Kushida then walked towards the school's most popular Cafe Pallet.

It's the place where Horikita got mad at us because we made up a lie and called her out.

Horikita paid for Kushida's drink. Of course, I paid for my own.

Taking the drink with a smile, Kushida sat down in a seat. We also sat down in front of her.

"Thanks. What did you have to talk about?"

"I'm making a study group to help Sudou-kun. Can you help us one more time?"

"Who are you doing this for? Is it for Sudou-kun's sake?"

Kushida also recognized that her request wasn't purely altruistic.

"No, this is for me."

“Is that so. Horikita-san, like usual, acts for yourself, huh.”

“Will you not help people who don’t act for their friends?”

“I think you’re free to think however you want. However, I wanted make sure that you wouldn’t lie, so I’m happy that you answered honestly. Ok, I’ll help you out. After all, we’re classmates, right? Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Y-yea. Please help us.”

“I want to ask you directly, though. It’s not for your friends, not for the points, but rather, you want me to help so that we can reach class A, right?”

“Yes.”

“That’s, that’s unbelievable... isn’t it impossible? Oh, I’m not trying to call you stupid. But how should I say it... more than half the class has already given up, you know?”

“Is it because the difference between our class and class A is too big?”

“Yea... Honestly, I don’t know if we can catch up. I don’t even know if we can get any points next month. I feel disheartened.”

Horikita hit the table with a clang.

“I’ll absolutely do it.”

“Ayanokouji-kun, are you also aiming for class A?”

“Yes. He is my assistant in reaching class A.”

You made me an assistant without my consent...

“Hmm... ok. Let me help.”

“Of course, that’s why we’re asking in the first place.”

“Not that, I want to join you guys in aiming for class A. Not just the study group, but I want to help with everything else you’ll be doing from now on.”

“E-eh? But...”

“Then do you not want me to help?”

Kushida looked at Horikita with widened eyes.

“Fine. I’ll formally ask for your help again if this study group goes well.”

That was her reply. Even though Kushida probably had something in mind, Horikita decided to let it go for some reason and let her join.

After receiving an affirmative reply from the usually stubborn Horikita, Kushida jumped up in excitement.

“Really!? Yay!”

Looking truly happy, she cheered in delight. This appearance of hers is also cute.

“Best regards again, Horikita-san! Ayanokouji-kun!”

She extended her left and right arms towards the two of us.

Feeling a bit confused, both Horikita and I shook her hand.

“However, I don’t know if Sudou-kun and his friends with agree to join again.”

“Yea. In the current situation, it certainly looks difficult.”

“Well then, can you leave it to me once again?” I can do at least this much after joining you guys. Ok?”

I felt overwhelmed at the pace Horikita and Kushida were moving at.

As if she was about to leap into action immediately, she took out her phone. Soon after, Ike and Yamauchi came over with ecstatic expressions. As soon as they saw me and Horikita, they looked at me as if they were saying, “You really told her about the chat!?”. Well, it’s convenient, so I’ll just stay silent. Their feelings of guilt will probably be effective in getting them to agree.

“Sorry for calling you two out. I have, or rather, Horikita has something to ask of you two.”

“W-w-what, what is it? What do you have to do with us?”

What an overreaction... They backed away in nervousness.

“Do you two have any plans to join Hirata-kun’s study group?”

“Eh? S-study group? No, we didn’t want to join because he’s too popular... We’re going to cram the day before the test. It’s worked since middle school.”

To Ike's words, Yamauchi nodded two, three times. They seem to have somehow managed by cramming last-minute for the past few years.

"That kind of thinking suits you two. However, the probability of getting kicked out of school is pretty high right now."

"You're the same as ever, whatever that means."

Sudou appeared while scowling at Horikita. Looks like Sudou was also caught in Kushida's trap.

"The one who should be the most worried is you, Sudou-kun. You look like you have absolutely no worries about dropping out of school."

"You already knew that. If you're not careful, I'll beat you up. I'm busy with basketball right now. It'll be good enough to study right before the test."

"C-calm down, Sudou."

Ike tried to calm down Sudou, as if he didn't know what he said in the chat.

"Hey, Sudou-kun. Won't you try studying one more time? You can probably barely pass the test by cramming. However, if it doesn't work, you won't be able to play basketball here anymore, you know?"

"That's... but I don't want to receive 'charity' from this girl. I haven't forgotten the words you threw at me the other day. If you're going to ask, apologize first. With sincerity."

Sudou declared that, showing hostility against Horikita. Personally, I think that even though he feels that it's dangerous to not study, he was more insulted by her words about basketball.

Of course, Horikita wouldn't apologize so easily. There's no one that would openly brag about having been wrong with their own mouth.

"I think you are wrong, Sudou-kun."

"What!?"

Instead of apologizing, she only added more fuel to the fire.

"However, our antipathy for each other is only trivial in this situation. I will teach you for my sake. You will study for your sake. Is that bad?"

“Do you really want to move up to class A? To go as far as to invite me.”

“Yes. Otherwise, who would choose to be concerned with you?”

At Horikita’s blunt words, Sudou got more mad.

“I’m busy with basketball. Even before a test, the others don’t take a break in order to study. I can’t afford to fall behind while I’m off studying.”

Having predicted that Sudou would say such words, Horikita took out a piece of paper and showed it to him. It was a detailed schedule until the day of the test.

“At the last study session, I learned that regular method of studying didn’t work for you. None of you understand the basics of the topics. It’s like taking a frog and introducing it to the ocean. The frog doesn’t know where to start. Also, I understand that taking time away from your hobbies adds to your stress. Therefore, I thought of a plan to address that problem.”

“What kind of sorcery is this? If there is such a plan, tell me.”

Both studying for tests and club activities can coexist. Believing that there was no way for that to be true, Sudou laughed with his nose.

“We have two weeks from now. You will start studying every day during class as if you’d die tomorrow.”

At first, I didn’t understand what she was saying. Everyone was confused.

“Usually, you three don’t work seriously during class, right?”

“Don’t decide that on your own.”

Ike objected.

“Then, are you diligent during class?”

“... No, we aren’t. I do nothing until class is over.”

“Right? In other words, you spend six hours a day just idling. Even outside of the one, two hours available after school, there is a ton of precious time being wasted. We must take good advantage of this time.”

“Certainly... in theory that would work, but... isn’t that kind of absurd?”

Kushida's worries are spot on. It's because they can't study that all the time during class is wasted.

If they can't even stop themselves from talking during class, I don't think they'll be able to understand any of the problems by themselves.

"I can't keep up with the material covered during class."

"I already know that. So, we'll use all the free time we have and have a small study session."

Horikita then turned to the next page. It had a full description of what we would do.

In summary, it's like this. After first period, everyone will meet up and discuss what they didn't understand. In the ten minutes of break, Horikita will then teach what they didn't know.

And then the whole process would repeat for the next period. Of course it's not as simple as it sounds.

However, since they can't keep up with the lesson, it may be difficult for them to be able to understand in that short time.

"W-wait. I'm confused. Is this possible?"

Ike also recognized that this would be a hard task.

"Yea, isn't it unreasonable to think that you could teach us in just 10 minutes?"

"Don't worry. During class, I'll make sure to get all the answers to the every question. And then Ayanokouji-kun and Kushida-san will teach you guys one-on-one."

If it's like that, I guess there is a chance that everyone can understand in just 10 minutes.

"You two, if it's just explaining the answers, you can do it, right?"

"But... I still don't think it's possible in that amount of time. Studying is hard, so I don't know..."

"The content covered in a single period is surprisingly small. It's only 1 page of

notes, or at most about 2. And the material concerning the test only takes up half the page. Anyway, if the time isn't enough, we can always use the lunch break. I'm not saying I want you to understand the material. I just want to make sure that it's in your head. The important thing is to make sure that you pay attention to the teacher's voice and the letters on the blackboard. Just forget about taking notes."

"Are you telling us not to take notes?"

"Trying to memorize the question and the answer is surprisingly difficult while taking notes."

Certainly, that might be true. By focusing on taking notes, valuable time is wasted.

At any rate, it looks like Horikita doesn't want to use any after school time.

"Just try it out. You can give it a run before you refuse."

"... I still don't want to do it. I want to spend my time differently than someone who studies 24/7. Also, I don't think I'll be able to study with an cheap trick like that."

Horikita thought of the plan while considering the three of them, but Sudou still did not agree.

"It looks like you're misunderstanding the fundamental concept here. Cheap tricks? There's no such thing. There's no way but to spend your time and study carefully. That's not only for studying, but also for everything else. Or are you saying that there are cheap tricks and shortcuts for basketball?"

"Of course there's no such thing. Only after you practice and practice do you get good."

Realizing what he said, Sudou inhaled sharply in surprise

"It's absolutely impossible for people who don't have the ability to focus. However, you would pour in all of your energy in order to get better at basketball. Even if it's only a fraction, use some of that energy for studying. In order to continue playing basketball at this school. So that you don't get kicked out."

It was a really small one, but Horikita unmistakably offered Sudou a small compromise. He hesitated.

However, his pride got in the way. No matter what, he would not agree.

"... I still won't participate. Thank you for being more civil, but I still can't agree."

Sudou tried to leave without ever having sat down, but Horikita stopped him.

If she let this chance go, there probably wouldn't be another opportunity to form a study group. Normally, I wouldn't have said anything, but I guess I have to pitch in and help here.

"Hey, Kushida. Do you already have a boyfriend?"

"Eh? Ehh? I don't have one, why are you asking me out of the blue?"

"Then, if I get 50 points on the next test, will you date me?"

I stuck out my hand.

"Ha? What are you saying, Ayanokouji!? Date me! I'll get 51 points!"

"No, no, me! Date me! I'll get 52 points!"

Ike quickly responded. And then Yamauchi. Kushida quickly recognized what I was trying to do.

"E-embarassing... I don't judge people by their test scores, you know?"

"But they want a reward for doing well. Look at their enthusiasm. If there's such a reward, they'll probably try even harder."

"W-well, how about this? I'll date the person who gets the highest test score... I like people who work hard to achieve something they might not even like."

"Woahhhh! I'll do it! I'll do it!"

They were all breathing heavily in excitement. I called out to Sudou.

"Hey Sudou. Are you going to do it? This is your chance."

It's a bit different than saying "Do you want to date Kushida?"

I have a rough understanding of Sudou's character. In a situation like this, it's hard to get him to participate. So, I have to find a compromise in order to get

him to join.

"... A date, huh. I guess it's not bad. Seriously, can't help it... I'll participate too."

Sudou turned and replied in a small voice. Kushida let out a sigh of relief.

"Keep in mind, boys are simpler creatures than you might think."

I welcomed Sudou to the group after saying so to Horikita.

1

The reunited study group began, and it started off pretty smoothly.

Of course, no one really found studying fun or was really delighted to be studying, but everyone worked hard so that they wouldn't have to drop out of school. The stupid trio, unlike their usual selves, frantically repeated the problems on the blackboard, twisting their necks as they tried to understand. Sudou occasionally was on the brink of dozing off, but for the sake of becoming a basketball pro, he just barely stayed awake during class. He was earnestly chasing after a far-fetched dream that some people would laugh at. Most of us first-years, who had just only gotten out of middle school, didn't have any dreams yet. Many have only briefly thought, "What will I be when I grow up?", but nothing more. In comparison, Sudou, who's already working towards his dream, is a praiseworthy person.

Anyway, how does this school even define and measure ability?

At the very least, it's not measured only by academic ability.

That's obvious when you see that Ike, Sudou, and I were all accepted.

If you're admitted for something other than your academic ability, though, you have to make sure to never get failing marks. Or at least, that's what it seemed like to me.

If the system itself isn't a lie, then there aren't many possible answers.

Or are they making difficult problems for Ike and Sudou so they can overcome them?

That question arose in my mind. Well, it probably doesn't have such a simple answer. Both the lessons and the small test are harder than what Sudou and the others can solve.

After the morning classes ended, Horikita looked down at her notes with a small nod. It looks like she's satisfied with the notes she took.

Even if it's teaching the stupid trio, Horikita will definitely do her best to create the best results. It's only natural because she wants to improve the class' score and raise the ability of the students.

However, we're not aiming for full marks. All we want is for Ike and the others to pass.

As soon as the bell rang for lunch, Ike and the others ran for their lives. Lunch is 45 minutes long. After eating, it was promised that everyone would meet in the library for 20 minutes to study.

At first, we planned to study in the classroom, but since it would be noisy, it was decided that we would study in the library so that we could concentrate better.

However, I think that the real reason was so that Horikita could avoid Hirata. Hirata's group usually discusses study methods for after school during lunch. If we were nearby, we would probably be able to overhear everything they say. She probably doesn't want that.

"Horikita, what are you doing for lunch?"

"Well—"

"Ayanakouji-kun. Do you want to eat lunch together? I have no other plans today."

Kushida suddenly jumped into my vision.

"Oh, sure. Then do you want to eat with Kushida too—"

"See you later. I already have plans, so excuse me."

Getting up quickly, she left the classroom by herself.

"Sorry, Ayanakouji-kun. Was I... a bother?"

"No, no, it's fine."

Kushida looked at Horikita's back and waved "Bye bye~".

Was this planned out? After discovering her secret the other day, I feel like Kushida is trying to keep track of me more blatantly. Even though she said she believed me, anyone would be scared that I might tell someone.

In the end, we ended up going to the cafe to get lunch. When the two of us arrived at the cafe, I was overwhelmed by the number of girls there.

"What is this, there are so many girls..."

More than 80% of all the students were girls.

"It's not really a place where boys eat."

The menu was filled with items like pasta and pancakes, which girls would like, but athletic people like Sudou would only complain that the portions were too small. The only boys here were riajuus and playboys. They were either sitting with another girl or multiple other girls.

"I think the school cafeteria is better after all. I feel uncomfortable."

"You'll get used to it. Koenji-kun comes here every day, you know? Look, he's over there."

Kushida pointed towards a large table with a lot of seats around it. I could see the figure of Koenji surrounded by girls.

He has his usual self-important attitude.

I seemed to never see him around lunch time; is this where he always went?

"He looks popular. Those girls are all third-years."

Kushida is also surprised. I could overhear some of the conversation between Koenji and the senpais.

"Koenji-kun, say 'aah~'"

"Haha~! Older girls are definitely better~"

Without feeling timid in the presence of third-years, he ate his meal practically glued to the girls.

"That guy, he's really something..."

"It looks like his name has been talked about here and there."

I see, are those girls doing it for the money?

"What a sad world we live in."

"Those girls are only being practical. You can't afford to eat with only your dreams."

"Would you do that too?"

"I like to dream more. You know, someone like a knight in shining armor?"

"A knight in shining armor, huh."

We found seats as far away from Koenji as possible.

"How about you, Ayanokouji-kun? Do you like someone like Horikita-san?"

"Why'd you bring up Horikita?"

"You're always with her. Isn't she cute?"

Well, I do think she's cute. Only the outside though.

"Did you know? You've been drawing attention from the girls for a while. You were even on the ranking list that the first-year girls created."

"Attention. Me? And what kind of ranking..."

It looks like I was rated by the girls when I wasn't aware.

Is it the same kind of ranking that the boys did with the girl's breasts?

"How many kinds of ranking would there be? The ikemen ranking? The wealth ranking? The grossness ranking? And the—"

"... You can stop. I don't want to know anymore."

"It's fine, it's fine. You were ranked fifth on the ikemen ranking.

Congratulations! By the way, first place was Satonaka-kun from class A. Second was Hirata-kun, and third and fourth were both boys from class A. I feel like Hirata-kun got a lot of points because of his looks and his character."

As one would expect from the star of class D. He was noticed by the girls in

the other classes too.

“Is it ok for me to be happy about this?”

“Of course. Oh, but you were also pretty high on the gloominess rankings too.”

“Let’s see...”

I looked at the phone. There were several lists of countless boys.

There was also a disturbing ranking titled, “Ranking of boys who should die”. Let’s say I didn’t see that.

“Are you not happy? You’re ranked fifth.”

“It would be different if I cared about being popular, but I don’t really feel anything.”

In fact, I don’t remember ever having gotten a letter with a heart seal on it from a girl.

“Are a lot of people participating?”

“Yea. There are a lot of people who participate, but I don’t know the total vote tally. The people who comment are also anonymous~”

In other words, it’s not very reliable.

“Anyway, I think you’re at a disadvantage. I think you’re definitely someone worthy of being an ikemen, but you don’t stand out like Hirata-kun. You’re not particularly smart, athletic, or well spoken, so you’re missing something, you know?”

“That, that killed me...”

That’s just saying that I have nothing appealing about me...

“S-sorry. I probably should’ve held back.”

Kushida reflected on her harsh words.

“Um, during middle school, did you have a girlfriend?”

“Is it bad if I didn’t?”

“... So you didn’t. Ahaha, it’s not particularly bad.”

"Rankings, huh. If boys did the same thing, what would the girls think?"

"Think of them as horrible human beings?"

Even though she was smiling, her eyes weren't. Well, that's to be expected. If the boys ranked the girls on cuteness or ugliness, they would definitely object. That's already one double standard between girls and boys. Anyway, Kushida has been interacting with me normally. I thought she would act differently after I found her on the rooftop.

"Hey. You don't have to force yourself to talk to me, you know."

"No, no, it's not forced. I find talking to you fun."

"Well, didn't you say that you hated talking to me?"

"Ahaha, I did, didn't I. Sorry, sorry, those are my true feelings."

... No, I'm hurt because those are your true feelings. Even though she's putting on that smile, she hates me. That's the worst.

"Actually, the reason I invited you to eat lunch with me was to keep an eye on you. I'm just asking, but if you had to choose between Horikita-san and me to be your ally, who would you choose? Would you choose me?"

"I'm no one's ally or opponent. I'm neutral."

"I think there are matters that can't be avoided by just being neutral. It's fine and all to oppose war for example, but you'll be wrapped up in it at some point, you know? If Horikita-san and I fought, it would be nice if you cooperated."

"Even if you say that..."

"Keep that in mind. I'm expecting you to help me."

"Expect, huh. If you ask me to help, I'd think that the first thing you should do is explain the situation."

Still smiling, Kushida shook her head no.

"No, the first thing is to make sure we trust each other."

"Yea, I suppose."

Both Kushida and I don't really understand each other too well.

Sometime down the line, when we trust each other more, I may be able to understand Kushida better.

2

One minute later than we had promised, we all met in the library.

Everyone was ready to take notes and was waiting to start. There were also a lot of other students that were currently studying in the library. From first-years to third-years, everyone was making an effort to study.

I could tell with a glance.

“You’re late.”

“Sorry, we were a bit late because it was crowded.”

“Did you two eat together!?”

Ike asked us, feeling suspicious because the two of us came together.

We did indeed eat together, but I don’t think we should say anything here.

“Yea, we did. We had lunch together.”

Like I said, you didn’t have to say that... With a disgruntled expression, Ike glared at me. As if he saw me as his rival. Without looking at me, Horikita continued to talk.

“Hurry up.”

“... Ok.”

I quietly sat down and took out my notes.

“I thought I would need more help, but geography is surprisingly easy.”

“Chemistry’s also easier than I thought.”

Ike and Yamauchi spoke up.

“That’s because there’s a lot of memorization problems. Subjects like Math or English have questions that you can’t answer if you don’t have the basics.”

“Don’t let your guard down. There might be current events on the test.”

“Current... events?”

“Current events. Events in politics or economics that may have occurred in recent years. In other words, there might be questions that cover material not in the textbook.”

“Ugh, that’s foul play! Doesn’t that make the scope of the test useless!?”

“That’s why you’ve got to study everything.”

“I suddenly hate geography...”

Of course, current events questions may appear on the test, but I think it’s something we can ignore for now.

If you worry too much about things that might not even be on the test, you’ll miss the important parts.

“Shouldn’t we hurry up?”

As the conversation keeps going off-track, precious time is wasted.

“Yea. We’re currently behind because a certain person was late.”

“... Are you still hung up on that?”

“It’s a problem for everyone. Well then, who’s the person who came up with inductive reasoning?”

“Um... it’s that guy we learned last class, right? Uh...”

While thinking over the answer, Ike spun his pen around.

“Oh, it’s that guy. His name made me really hungry, so I remembered.”

“Francis Xavier!... or something like that, right?”

Sudou wasn’t able to recollect the correct name.

“I remembered. It was Francis Bacon!”

“Correct.:

“Yes! This is definitely a perfect score!”

“No, not at all...”

If we continued at this pace for the next week, desperately studying,

everyone would probably pass.

“Everyone, just take care of your health. We don’t have much time to study.”

Kushida also understand that there was practically no room for error this time around.

“It’s ok, it’ll be fine if it’s these three.”

“As expected of Horikita-chan. It feels like you’re trusting us!”

I think she was trying to say that “Idiots don’t catch colds”, but whatever.

“Hey, be quiet over there. Your yapping is loud.”

A student nearby paused studying and looked at us.

“Sorry, sorry, I was too loud. I was happy since I got a problem right. The person who came up with inductive reasoning is Francis Bacon, you know? I won’t forget since I learned it once~”

Ike said while laughing in joy.

“Huh? ... By any chance, are you guys in class D?”

A group of boys nearby all looked at us all at once. At their reaction, Sudou bristled up in irritation.

“So what? So what if we’re in class D. Do you have any problems with that?”

“No no, we don’t have any problems with that. I’m Yamawaki, in class C. Nice to meet you.

Yamawaki looked at us while laughing.

“Well, how should I say it... I guess it’s good that this school divides classes by ability. That way I don’t have to study with people like you guys.”

“What!?”

The one who bursted out in anger was, obviously, Sudou.

“You’re just getting mad at the truth. If we fought inside of the school, I wonder which class’ points will be deducted. Oh wait, you don’t have points to start with. Thing is, you’ll probably get expelled, you know?”

“You wanna fight? Bring it on!”

Sudou's outburst attracted the attention of the others in the quiet library.

If this situation becomes worse, the teachers will probably find out about it.

"He's right. If you create a disturbance, we don't know what'll happen. You should keep in mind that getting kicked out is really possible. And I don't mind that you're badmouthing us, but you're in class C, right? It's not really a class you should brag about."

"There seems to have been some kind of calculation error between classes A to C. But you guys are on a whole different level."

"What a nice way to put it. The way I see it, every class but class A are just bunched up together."

Yamawaki stopped laughing and glared at Horikita.

"For an inferior product that doesn't have a single point, you're saying some cheeky things. Did you think you can say anything just because you look cute?"

"Thank you for your words that have no logical connection to the topic. I was never self-conscious about my appearance until now, but I feel uncomfortable being praised by you."

"Tsu!"

Hitting the table, Yamawaki stood up.

"H-hey. It's dangerous for you to start since others will hear about it."

The other class C students tried to hold Yamawaki back, tugging at his sleeves.

"For the next test, if you get a failing mark, you know you have to drop out, right? I'm looking forward to seeing how many people will drop out from your group."

"Too bad for you, but no one will drop out from class D. Before worrying about us, why don't you worry about yourselves first. If you're not careful, you might fail, you know?"

"Kukuku. Fail? Stop with the jokes."

"We're not studying so we can avoid failing marks. We're studying to get better scores. Don't lump us in with you guys. Also, being happy over knowing

Francis Bacon is; are you sane? Why are you studying things that aren't even on the test?"

"Huh?"

"By any chance, do you not even know what's going to be covered on the test? This is why you're the inferior class."

"That's enough out of you."

Sudou lost his temper and grabbed Yamawaki by his collar.

"H-hey hey, you're really going to use violence? You'll be deducted points. You ok with that?"

"We don't even have any points to lose~!"

Sudou drew back his arm. Ah man, is he really going to knock him out?

I should really stop him. I pushed back my chair to get up—

"Ok, stop, stop!"

A girl called out.

Sudou stopped at the unexpected new character.

"Hey, you're not a part of this; don't interfere."

"Not a part of this? I'm trying to use this library, I can't just overlook this disturbance. If you really wanted to hit him, can't you do that outside?"



At the blonde girl's reasonable words, Sudou let go of Yamawaki.

"And you guys, aren't you provoking him too much? If this continued, do you

think it would be fine if the school got word of this?"

"S-sorry. We didn't mean to do that, Ichinose."

Ichinose. I remember hearing that name before.

Oh, it was the student in class B who was talking to Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"Hey, let's move. If we study here, we'll become stupid too."

"Y-yea."

Yamawaki and his group of friends left the area.

"If you guys are going to keep studying here, keep it quiet."

At those words, I gave a small nod, feeling admiration at her gallant form.

"Unlike Horikita, she keeps order to this place, huh."

"I wasn't trying to create a disturbance. I was just saying the truth."

Saying the truth caused the disturbance, though...

"Hey... That guy said that this wasn't on the test... right?"

"... What does this mean?"

We exchanged glances.

The material that Chiyabashira-sensei would be on the test was the Age of Exploration.

We all definitely made sure to write that down.

"Doesn't this mean that each class gets a different test?"

"That's unlikely... the test should be same for everyone in the grade."

As Horikita said, all the problems on the test should be same for the five main subjects.

Otherwise, the effect of our grades on the points becomes unclear.

By any chance, was class C informed of a change to the test before anyone else?

Or was class D the only one not informed...

From the unexpected new information, we couldn't help but be confused.

What if different topics were tested on the history portion of the test between the classes?

... No... if only the history portion was different, it would be really weird.

But if the whole test was different...

This whole week of studying would become wasted time.

3

It was ten minutes before the end of lunch. All of the members in the study group packed up and headed towards the staff room. In any case, we can't proceed until we make sure we know what's covered on the test.

"Sensei. We have something we want to confirm quickly."

"That was quite an entrance. All the other teachers are surprised."

"Sorry for intruding."

"It's ok, but we're in the middle of something. Keep it short."

She kept writing in her notebook, continuing her work.

"Last week, when you told us what was covered on the test, did you make a mistake? A little while ago, class C students told us that their test was different."

Without batting an eyebrow, Chiyabashira-sensei listened to Horikita. Then Sensei, who was listening in silence, suddenly stopped moving her pen.

"...The topics covered on the test were changed last Friday. Sorry, I forgot to tell you guys."

"What—!?"

After writing down the new scope of the test on a piece of paper, she ripped the page and handed it to Horikita. The textbook pages on the paper were all material we had already covered, and Sudou and the others hadn't learned the material.

"Horikita, thanks to you, I noticed my mistake. Thanks to the rest of you too. Later then."

"W-wait a bit, Sae-chan-sensei!? Isn't this way too late?"

"No, I don't think so. If they study for the next week, everything will be fine, no?"

Without any second thoughts. Chiyabashira-sensei tried to get us out of the staff room. However, no one moved.

"Even if you guys refuse to leave, nothing will change. You understand that, right?"

"...Let's go."

"B-but Horikita-chan! I can't agree to this!"

"As Sensei said, staying here would just be a waste of time. We should just start anew and study the revised material."

"But still!"

Turning her heels, Horikita left the room. Sudou, Ike, and Yamauchi all followed, albeit reluctantly. Chiyabashira-sensei didn't even glance at us as we left. She didn't even say sorry for her mistake. Above all, I thought the other teachers would've said something after that incident.

Even though it was a pretty serious mistake for a homeroom teacher to make, there was no response from anyone else. My eyes then met with Hoshinomiya-sensei for a moment. With a small smile, she waved at me.

Well, I guess that's a response. However, I don't think that she just "forgot" to tell us about the test.

Walking out into the hallway, the bell for the afternoon classes rang.

"Kushida-san. I have a favor to ask of you."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"I want you to tell the rest of class D about the changes to the test."

With that, Sensei handed Kushida a piece of paper.

“I’m ok with it, but... is it fine for me to do so?”

“You’re the best person to ask here. Also, it’s impossible to take the test without knowing what it’s about.”

“Ok, I will inform everyone about the change.”

“By tomorrow, I’ll make sure to revise our study plan as well.”

Even though Horikita was pretending to be calm, I knew she was feeling slightly anxious. Our frantic studying the past few days are now useless. Also, we only have about a week left until the test.

However, the biggest worry was Sudou, Ike and Yamauchi’s motivation.

“Horikita. I know it’ll be hard, but I will rely on you.”

Sudou bowed to Horikita.

“I... starting tomorrow, will take a break from club activities for a week. Will that work?”

“...That’s...”

Considering that we only have a week left, it’s a very reasonable decision.

Even though it was the best possible thing she could ask for, Horikita couldn’t immediately accept.

“Is that really ok? It’ll be hard, you know?”

“Studying is difficult, right?”

Broadly grinning, Sudou patted her shoulder.

“Sudou, are you serious?”

“Yea. I’m really annoyed right now. Both at our homeroom teacher and those class C punks.”

I guess you could call this a blessing in disguise. Because of this difficult situation, Sudou is starting to give studying a chance. He probably felt that he wouldn’t pass if he didn’t try harder. Sudou’s new motivation seems to have set something off in Ike and Yamauchi.

“Can’t help it, guess we’ll try harder too.”

“Alright. If you guys have prepared yourselves for it, then please cooperate with me. However, Sudou-kun—”

Horikita brushed off Sudou’s hand from her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me. If you do it again, I won’t show any mercy.”

“...You’re not cute, woman...”

“We’ll absolutely do well!”

“Me too!”

Kushida, also feeling motivated, stuck out her first.

“Ayanokouji-kun, you too!”

“Huh? No, I’ll—”

“By any chance... did you give up?”

“...I’m thinking about it...”

“You already promised to work with me. Did you forget?”

Horikita kept an eye on me after hearing me.

“I’m not good at teaching. People are good and bad at some things, right?”

Honestly, in terms of teaching others, Horikita and Kushida are better than I am.

Also, I’m not someone cut out to teach.

“No, your test scores aren’t that good, right?”

“There’s not much time, so I think it’s better for Horikita and Kushida to teach together, rather than doing separate one-on-one sessions. Also, there’s something I’m worried about.”

“Worried about?”

The events that just happened in the staff room are too serious to overlook.

headed to the cafeteria.

“Where are you going?”

After having noticed me rush out of the classroom, Kushida followed. Stopping in front of me, she leaned over and looked up to me.

“Because it’s lunch, I thought I would go to the cafeteria.”

“Fuun. Is it fine if I go with you?”

“It’s fine, but you have a lot of other people you can ask too, you know.”

“Even though I have a lot of friends I can eat with, you have no one. Also, although you would usually talk to Horikita-san first, you didn’t say anything today. Didn’t you say yesterday that you were worried about something in the staff room? What was that?”

As usual, Kushida was listening to the surroundings; or rather, observing her surroundings. Honestly, I thought it would be annoying if someone was always, but I think it’s fine if it’s Kushida. I only got to know her secret by chance. I won’t do anything bad.

“I can tell you, but will you promise not to tell anyone else?”

“Keeping secrets is my strong point!”

We made our way to the cafeteria. Before long, we entered the confusion of the cafeteria and got to the meal ticket machine. After buying a ticket for two portions, I moved away from the ticket vending machine and didn’t line up at the counter. From there, I looked at the fingertips of the students who were buying their food.

“What is it?”

Kushida looked at me in curiosity.

“There is a possibility that this will lead to an answer to what I was concerned about.”

I looked at all the students who were buying lunch. After about 20 students, I found my target student. The student bought the meal and walked over to the counter with heavy steps.

“Alright, let’s go.”

“What? Ok.”

Quickly exchanging our tickets for meals, I walked over to the student and sat down.

“Um, excuse me. You’re... a senpai, right?”

“...Huh? Who are you?”

Quietly looking up, he looked at me, uninterested.

“Are you a second-year? Third-year?”

“Third year. You’re a first-year, huh.”

“I am Ayanakouji-kun of class D. Senpai, you’re also in class D, right?”

“...What does that have to do with you?”

Kushida looked at me in surprise, asking “How did you know?”

“Because he was restricted to the free meal. It’s not very tasty, is it?”

Senpai was eating the free vegetable meal.

“What the hell, making me feel annoyed.”

He tried to get up with his try, but I stopped him.

“I have something to ask you. If you listened to me, I would show my gratitude.”

“...Gratitude?”

My small voice was lost in the confusion of the cafeteria.

The nearby students were also engrossed in their conversations with friends.

“Do you still have the problems on the midterm from your first semester? Or if you know someone that has all the previous test problems, can you let us know who he is?”

“Hey, do you even understand what you’re saying?”

“It’s not anything surprising. I don’t think it’s against school policy to use old test problems to study.”

“Why are you asking me?”

“That’s easy. I thought it would be easier to cut a deal with someone without points. Honestly, the free vegetable meal isn’t that tasty. Of course, things are different if you actually like eating that meal. What do you say?”

“...How much?”

“10,000 points. That’s as far as I can go.”

“I don’t have any of the problems, but... I know someone who does. If you want to ask him to help, you need at least 30,000 points.”

“30,000 is way too much. I don’t have that kind of money.”

“How much do you have, then?”

“...20,000 points.”

“Then 20,000 points... No, 15,000 points will do. Nothing less.”

“15,000 points, huh...”

“If you would go as far as to ask a complete stranger about past problems, you must be really desperate. After all, the school expels everyone who fails. I’ve already lost a lot of my friends.”

“I see. ...Ok. I will pay 15,000 points.”

“Then the deal is good. Of course, you’ll have to pay in advance.”

“I don’t mind, but if you go back on your word, I won’t forgive you. I’ll make sure you get expelled.”

“...Fine. I don’t want any bad records. If rumors pop up that I ripped off a kouhai, I probably won’t be forgiven.”

“Now then, senpai, since I will pay you 15,000 points, can you give me a freebie? I want to see the answers to the mock test.”

“Alright, I’ll include that. Well, I think that whatever you’re trying to do is useless, but sure.”

It looks like senpai understood what I was thinking.

“Thank you.”

The senpai quickly left his seat. I guess he didn't want to be noticed.

"H-hey, Ayanokouji-kun... Was that... was that really ok?"

"There's no problem at all. The transfer of points is allowed by school rules, so there aren't any violations."

"That's fine, but isn't it dishonest to get past year's questions?"

"Dishonest? I don't think so. If the school didn't allow it, there would've been something in the rules. Also, I confirmed another thing when I was just talking to the third-year senpai. It looks like these kind of transactions aren't that strange."

"Huh...?"

"He wasn't particularly surprised, and he quickly agreed to listen to my proposal. It probably isn't his first time negotiating. He has not only the answers to the midterms, but even the mock test. There's no mistake."

Her eyes were spinning in astonishment.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you were really different. I was surprised."

"It's just insurance to make sure that Sudou and the others don't get expelled."

"But this might turn out to be useless. Past questions are past questions, right? This year's test may be completely unrelated."

"The problems may not be exactly the same, but there will definitely be some similarities. The last mock exam gave me that hint."

"Hint?"

"You noticed that there were really hard problems along with easy ones, right?"

"Well, yea. Those were the last problems of each section. I didn't understand those questions at all."

"When I looked into it after, those were problems that second-years and third-years were learning. In other words, they don't expect first-years to be able to solve those problems. Isn't it useless to throw in those kind of

unsolvable problems? They're probably there for a reason other than to actually test us. If the problems on the mock exam were the exact same as previous mock exams, what would happen?"

"...If I saw those problems, I would be able to ace the test."

The same thing is applicable to the midterm.

Soon after, I got a message from the third-year senpai with an attachment. It was the old tests.

First, I checked the mock test. The key question is, are the last three problems the same?

Kushida also tried to look at my phone.

"Are they? Are they the same?"

"It's completely identical. The problems, sentences, and all the words are the same."

"That's amazing! If we showed this to everyone, it would be an easy success! Don't show it to only Sudou-kun, but everyone else too!"

"No, we won't show it to Sudou, Ike, and Yamauchi yet."

"W-why? You went as far as to use so many points."

"If they hear that these are the test questions, they'll lose all motivation and focus. Above all, overconfidence is the biggest problem. The midterm may not be the same as the mock test; there's a possibility the problems are different on the midterm."

It's essential to keep in mind that these old tests are insurance.

"Then what are you going to use them for?"

"Release these problems the day before the test. Then we tell everyone that these problems are roughly the same as this year's test. What would everyone do then?"

"That night, everyone would try to memorize the problems!"

"That's how it is."

The students who are don't understand the basics probably can't memorize all the problems in a single day. But, it's not difficult to understand the problems beforehand. We're not trying to get the highest score possible on this next test. We're trying to avoid failing. If we ask for too much, the plan might fail.

But with this, we can probably get everyone to pass in class D.

"Hey... When did you think to get these old tests?"

"Since we learned that the test was different. However, I had an inkling that the old tests might be similar ever since the midterm was mentioned."

"Eh!? T-that early!?"

"When Chiyabashira-sensei first mentioned the midterm, she was speaking in an unusual manner. Even though she knew Sudou and the other's grades and attitudes, she spoke with absolute confidence. In other words, she confirmed that there was a surefire way to save them."

"Is that... the old tests?"

The reason why Sudou, Ike, and Yamauchi were all admitted to this school, despite their academic ability, must be connected to this somehow. If they can't get good grades by studying hard, this is a sort of escape route for them. In other words, it's possible for everyone get near perfect scores by getting the old tests. That's how I understood it, at least.

"...Ayanokouji-kun, you're really observant, aren't you?"

"I'm just being cunning. I didn't think that I could pass the midterm without any help anyway. I was looking for a way to reliably pass."

"Fuun."

As if she had something on her mind, Kushida had a mischievous smile.

"I have a favor to ask. Could you say that you got the old questions? Say that you got the old tests from a third-year senpai that you get along with."

"I'm fine with it, but... are you really ok with that?"

"I like to avoid trouble, after all. I don't want to stand out. Also, our

classmates trust you. It'd be a lot better for you to tell everyone else."

"...Ok. If you say so."

"Thanks. I don't want to stand out unnecessarily."

"Well then, let's keep this a secret between us."

"Yea, that sounds good."

"Don't you feel like there's some kind of trust between us when we share this kind of secret?"

"Well, dunno. I hope so."

"Thanks."

Kushida curtly replied. I don't know what her thanks was exactly for, though.

Chapter 9: The midterm

Today is Thursday after school. The day before the midterm.

After Chiyabashira-sensei ended homeroom and walked out, Kushida quickly took action.

She took printouts of the old midterm that I copied at the convenience store the other day and brought them with her to the podium.

“Sorry, but can you guys listen to me before going home?”

Sudou also stopped and listened.

I couldn’t leave this role to anyone but Kushida.

“I hope everyone has been studying a lot for tomorrow’s test. I have something that can help for some final studying tonight. I’ll hand them out now.

She handed out the questions and answer sheet to everyone in the front row.

“Test... questions? Did you make them, Kushida-san?”

Horikita was also surprised.

“Actually, these are old test problems. I got them from a third-year senpai last night.”

“Old test problems? Eh, eh? Are these actual valid questions?”

“Yea. Two years ago, the midterm had nearly the same questions as the one on this problem set. So, if you practice, I think we’ll do better.”

“Woah! Seriously? Kushida-chan, thank you!”

Ike hugged his test in happiness. All the other students also couldn’t hold back their emotions.

“What the hell, if we have these problems, doesn’t all of our studying become useless?”

While laughing, Yamauchi was complaining at the same time. My prediction was completely right.

“Sudou-kun, do your best while studying today.”

“Yea. Thanks.”

Sudou also received the problems happily.

“This is a secret from all the other classes! Let’s all do well and succeed!”

Ike shouted out loud with determination, but I had to agree. There’s no need to send help to the other classes. Everyone returned home in high spirits.

“Kushida-san. Good job.”

Horikita went up to Kushida and praised her uncharacteristically.

“Ehehe, is that so?”

“I never thought to use the old tests. I’m also thankful that you went to see if these questions were still valid to use.”

Looks like Horikita, who doesn’t have any friends, didn’t come up with the idea.

“It’s nothing special. I’m doing this for my friends, after all.”

“Also, I think it was right to announce it today, after school. If word got out earlier, everyone would’ve probably lost motivation.”

“It’s only because I got the problems pretty late. If the same problems are on tomorrow’s test... everyone will probably get good scores.”

“Yea. Also, our last two weeks of studying weren’t in vain.”

Even though it was probably an extremely long two weeks for the students who got failing grades, but I think they all got into the habit of studying.

“It was hard, but it was fun too.”

“I don’t think that trio had the least bit of fun while studying.”

Well, we’ve done all we could. It was up to how much effort the other three put into studying.

“I just hope that I don’t blank out during the test.”

There’s not much that can be done about that one. No matter how well we do while studying, all that matters is how well we do on the actual test. Only

practicing with the old test problems can help with this issue.

“Well then, I’m going home too.”

Horikita silently looked at Kushida, who was putting her textbook and notes into her bag.

“Kushida-san.”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you very much for everything up to now. If you weren’t here, the study group wouldn’t have succeeded.”

“Don’t worry about it~ I just want to aim for the higher classes along with everyone. That’s why I agreed to help. I’ll help any time.”

With a smile, Kushida stood up and grabbed her bag.

“Wait. I just want to confirm one thing.”

“Confirm?”

“I need to confirm something because you said you wanted to keep cooperating with me.”

Horikita looked straight at the smiling Kushida and asked.

“You hate me, don’t you?”

“Hey, hey...”

I was wondering what she wanted to ask, but that was unexpected.

“Why do you think that?”

“You’re not answering because it’s true... am I right?”

“...Ahaha, you got me.”

She put on her backpack and slowly lowered her hand back down. And then she faced Horikita while smiling.

“Yea. I really hate you.”

She replied directly, without trying to hide it.

“Should I tell you the reason?”

"...No. It's not necessary. It's good enough to just know the fact. It just means that I can now talk to you without any hesitation from now on."

Even though she was told directly that she was hated, Horikita calmly replied to Kushida.

1

"No absences; looks like everyone's here."

In the morning, Chiyabashira-sensei walked into the classroom with a smile.

"This is the first obstacle to being able to stay in school. Does anyone have any questions?"

"We have been studying diligently for the past few weeks. I don't think there will be any dropouts in this class, you know?"

"You have a lot of confidence, Hirata."

All the other students also had a look of confidence. Lining up the tests by tapping them against the table, she then passed them out. First period is social studies. I guess you can call it the easiest test among all the subjects.

If anyone trips up here, honestly, all the other tests will be a difficult struggle.

"If no one fails on this midterm and the finals in July, everyone will get a summer vacation."

"Vacation?"

"Yea, that's right... You'll be on a dream-like vacation on an island surrounded by the blue sea."

Summer and the beach means... we'll be able to see the girl's swimsuits...

"W-what is this strange pressure..."

Chiyabashira-sensei took a step back from the pressure she felt from the students (mainly the boys).

"Everyone... Let's do our best!"

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Ike loudly shouted in agreement. I also shouted, blending in with the confusion and noise.

“Pervert.”

Horikita glanced at me. No more sound came out of my throat.

Before long, the tests were handed out to everyone. And with the teacher’s signal, everyone started at the same time.

Looking through the problems, I quickly scanned over the whole test. Can the trio pass the test? I checked if the questions were similar to the old test questions.

—Alright.

I made a small triumphant pose. All the questions are recognizable. I didn’t look at the questions too carefully, but I couldn’t see any differences.

It was obvious that I could get a near perfect score if I memorized all the answers.

Looking around the classroom, I didn’t see any students that looked confused or impatient. Seems like a good majority of the students did some last minute studying.

I also slowly went through each of the problems.

During second and third period, the test continued with the Japanese and chemistry sections. While I was solving the problems, I realized another thing. The topics that Horikita taught are pretty consistent with what the test covered. From the class lessons, she was able to accurately predict the type of questions that would appear. The silent girl who continued to write down answers in the seat next to me was more impressive than I first thought.

And then it was fourth period. Math. All the abnormally hard problems that were at the end of the mock test are, without a doubt, in this test. They probably don’t understand what it means, but they should’ve done well if they memorized the answer.

And then it was break time.

Some of the study group members, like Ike, Yamauchi, Kushida, and Horikita

all gathered.

“This is an easy pass!”

“I feel like I’ll get a 120 this time!”

Ike was pretty relaxed. From the smile on his face, Yamauchi also looked pretty relieved.

While they were smiling, they were holding the old test questions for a final review.

“Sudou-kun, how are you doing?”

Kushida called out to Sudou, who was reviewing in his seat.

But Sudou looked gloomy, and was staring at the questions with great focus.

“Sudou-kun?”

“...Huh? Oh, sorry, I’m a bit busy.”

He was staring at the English questions. He had a thin layer of sweat on his forehead.

“Sudou, by any chance... did you not study the questions?”

“I did everything but English. I dozed off in the middle.”

Sudou was getting irritated. In other words, this is his first time looking at these questions.

“What!?”

Sudou only had about 10 minutes of break time left to go over these problems.

“Dammit, none of these answers are sticking in my head.”

English is different from the previous tests and isn’t that easy to memorize. In the first place, trying to memorize all the answers in the next 10 minutes is practically impossible.

“Sudou-kun, memorize the answers that are shorter and worth more.”

Getting up from her seat, Horikita moved next to Sudou.

“O-ok.”

And then he started studying the easier to memorize and worth more, as Horikita said.

“A-are you ok?”

Trying to not get in the way, Kushida asked from the side, looking anxious.

“Unlike Japanese, I don’t know the basics, so this looks like a magic spell to me. Memorizing this will take some time.”

“Y-yea. I also have trouble with English...”

10 minutes quickly passed by, and the unforgiving chime rang.

“I did what I could do. Before I forget, I’ll try and do all the questions that I crammed first.”

“Yea...”

And then the test started. While all the other students started solving the problems, Sudou was having trouble. Occasionally, he tapped the pen on his head while thinking and kept pausing while writing. But no one can help him now. The only way to pass the test now is for Sudou to work his way through by himself.

2

After the last test finished, we all gathered around Sudou once again.

“H-hey, how was it?”

Ike asked anxiously. Sudou seemed to be slightly uneasy as well.

“I don’t know... I did what I could, but I don’t know how well I did...: “It’ll be fine. Since you’ve studied hard, things will turn out well.

“Dammit, why did I fall asleep!?”

He was tapping his fingers against the table in irritation. Horikita stood right in front of Sudou.

“Sudou-kun.”

“...What is it. Are you lecturing me again?”

“It was indeed your fault that you didn’t go over the last part. However, like you said, you did your best when we were studying. You didn’t throw in the towel even when it was difficult. With how much effort you put in, I think you should feel proud of what you did.”

“What’s this, are you trying to comfort me?”

“Comfort? I was only speaking the truth. When I look at Sudou-kun, I understand that studying is difficult for you.”

Horikita was praising Sudou. None of us could believe that this was really happening.

“Let’s wait for the results.”

“Yea...”

“Then... one more thing. I have something to correct.”

“Correct?”

“Earlier, I said that your hopes of becoming a basketball pro were foolish.”

“Why are you reminding me?”

“I looked into how one could become a basketball pro in this world. I learned that it was a really difficult path to get on the professional scene.”

“Isn’t that why you told me to give up? Because it’s such a reckless dream.”

“It’s not like that. I know you have a passion for basketball. I know that you probably understand how difficult it is to become a pro.”

It was her usual attitude, but this was clearly an awkward apology from Horikita.

“In Japan, there are a lot of people who want to become pros. Among those people, there are also people who want to become internationally known. You’re part of the latter group, right?”

“Yea. The incredibly foolish me is trying to become a basketball pro. Even though I might be stuck living a sad life as a part-time worker, I’m going to succeed.”

"I always thought that there was no need to understand anyone else but myself. But when you said you wanted to become a pro, I insulted you immediately. Looking back on it, I regret it. Someone who doesn't know how difficult and hard of a goal it is to achieve has no right to call it stupid and foolish. Sudou-kun, don't forget the hard work you put into studying and use it for basketball. You'll be able to become a pro with that kind of effort. At least, that's what I think."

Horikita's expression was the same as always, but she lowered her head to Sudou.

"Sorry for what I said back then. ...Well then, goodbye."

Leaving behind her words of apology, Horikita left the room.

"H-hey, did you see that? Horikita apologized!? And that nicely!?"

"I can't believe it...!"

Ike and Yamauchi were in complete shock. I was also somewhat surprised. Kushida too.

Horikita admitted that Sudou did his best.

Sitting in his chair in a daze, Sudou looked at Horikita as she walked out of the classroom.

A short while after, he put his right hand over his heart and looked backed at us.

"T-this is bad... I... I think I'm falling in love..."

Chapter 10: The beginning

Walking into the classroom, Chiyabashira-sensei looked around the classroom in surprise. Everyone was waiting in suspense for the results of the midterms.

“Sensei. I heard that the results will be released today, but when exactly?”

“There’s no need for you to be that excited about it, Hirata. You probably passed.”

“...When will they be released?”

“Well, now is a good time. There isn’t much time for certain procedures if we did it after school.”

At the words “certain procedures”, some of the students had a visible reaction.

“What... what do you mean?”

“Don’t be confused. I’ll explain it now.”

After all, this school likes to explain the details all at once.

She stuck the paper with everyone’s names and scores on the board.

“Honestly, good job. I didn’t think this class would do this well. In math, Japanese, and social studies, there were over 10 perfects.”

Looking at the row of 100s, the students were cheering. However, one group of students weren’t smiling.

The only grade is Sudou’s English score.

And then—

Four of Sudou’s grades were a solid 60 points. His english score was a 39.

“Woohoo!!”

Sudou stood up and shouted in relief. Ike and Yamauchi stood up at the same time and cheered.

There was no red line to be found on the paper. Kushida and I glanced at each

other and breathed a small sigh of relief. Horikita... wasn't smiling or cheering, but she appeared to be relieved inside.

"You saw it, right Sensei? When we put our minds to it, we can do it!"

Ike had a triumphant smile.

"Yea, I recognize that. You did well. However—"

Chiyabashira-sensei had a red pen in her hand.

"Huh...?"

Sudou let out a concerned voice.

She drew a red line right above Sudou's name.

"W-what the hell? What does this mean?"

"You failed, Sudou."

"What? That's a lie, right? Don't bullshit me, why did I fail!?"

Of course, Sudou was the first to protest.

The classroom did a complete 180 from cheering to an angry uproar in a split second.

"Sudou. You failed on the English exam."

"Don't lie to me, the passing grade is a 32! I passed!"

"When did anyone say that the passing grade is a 32?"

"No no, Sensei said so! Right, everyone!?"

Ike shouted in support of Sudou.

"Nothing you say will help. This is the unmistakable truth. On this midterm, the passing grade was a 40. In other words, you were one point short. Almost, but not quite."

"F-forty!? I never heard of this! I can't agree to this!"

"Then, should I tell you how we decide what is a passing grade?"

Chiyabashira-sensei wrote a formula on the board.

She wrote, "79.6/2 = 39.8".

"Last test, and this test as well, each class has a set passing grade. And that grade was half the average."

In other words, anything lower than a 39.8 was a failing grade.

"Well then, that shows how you failed. You got a lower score."

"Impossible... Does... does that mean, I am expelled?"

"Although it was a short time, you did well. After school, you will be asked to fill out a dropout form, but you will need a legal guardian. I'll contact them for you afterwards."

Seeing everything progress so casually, all the students knew that it was actually happening.

"The rest of you, good job for passing. On the final, please work hard to do the same and pass the test. Well then, onto the next topic—"

"S-sensei. Is Sudou-kun really dropping out? Is there no way to save him?"

Hirata was the first to reach out to Sudou.

Even though Sudou hated him and verbally insulted him.

"It's the truth. He got a failing grade, so he will have to drop out."

"...Can we see Sudou-kun's answer sheet?"

"Even if you look at it, you won't find any mistakes in the grading. Well, I expected you guys to make a fuss about it."

Taking Sudou's English exam answer sheet, she passed it to Hirata.

Hirata looked through every question with a gloomy expression.

"There are... no mistakes."

"Well, if that's all, homeroom is now over."

Without any sympathy or any second chances, Chiyabashira-sensei ruthlessly announced his expulsion. Knowing that any comforting words would have the opposite effect, Ike and Yamauchi stayed silent. Hirata was also the same. And sadly, it looks like one portion of the class was relieved. Are they happy a hindrance to the class has finally been kicked out?

“Sudou, come to the staff room after school.”

“...Chiyabashira-sensei. Do you have some time?”

Although she had stayed silent until then, Horikita quickly raised her hand.

In her school life, Horikita had never made remarks during class voluntarily.

At the new sight, both Chiyabashira-sensei and the whole class were surprised.

“That’s unusual, Horikita. You’re raising your hand. What’s your question?”

“Earlier, Sensei said that the previous test had a passing grade of 32 points, which was calculated by the formula you wrote earlier. Is there no mistake in calculating the last test’s passing grade?”

“Yea, no mistake.”

“Then, I have one more question. I calculated the mock test’s average to be a 64.4. Dividing that by two, you get 32.2. In other words, higher than a 32. Despite that, the passing grade was a 32 by truncating the decimal point. That’s contradictory from this time.”

“Y-yea. The passing grade should be a 39 then!”

In other words, Sudou’s grade of 39 should’ve just barely passed.

“I see. You anticipated Sudou’s grade to barely pass. Only your English grade was low, after all.”

“Horikita, you...”

Sudou noticed something. The other students, in surprise, looked at the paper once again. Even though four of her five grades were perfect, she got a 51 on her English score.

“You really—”

Sudou realized what she did.

And by no mistake, too. In order to lower the average grade, she purposely lowered her own grades.

“If you think my opinion is wrong, please tell me why the calculation differs

between the last test and this test.”

The last ray of light. The last bit of hope.

“I see. Well then, let me tell you one more thing. Sadly, there’s one error in your formula. Rather than truncating, we rounded the tests. Last test rounded down to 32, this test rounded up to 40.”

“Tsk...”

“In your mind, you probably noticed that the score was rounded. But holding onto that possibility... well, that’s too bad. First period will start soon, so I will leave now.”

Horikita had no more ways to retort and stayed silent. She wasn’t able to counter her words, and her last hope was shot down. After leaving the classroom, the door slammed shut and the whole class was silent.

While trying to face the reality of having to drop out, Sudou looked at Horikita, who tried to stop him from failing by dropping her own grades.

“...I’m sorry. I should’ve dropped my points even further.”

Horikita slowly lowered her hand.

Even 51 points was considerably low.

If she dropped her grade to the 40s, she herself would be at risk for dropping out.

“Why... You said that you hated me, didn’t you?”

“I’m just doing this for myself, don’t misunderstand. It was in vain, though.”

I slowly got out of my seat.

“W-where are you going, Ayanokouji!?”

“To the bathroom.”

I exited the classroom and quickly walked towards the staff room. While wondering whether or not Chiyabashira-sensei had already reached the staff room, I saw her looking out the window, standing still in the hallway. As if she was waiting for someone.

"Ayanokouji, class will start soon."

"Sensei. Is it fine if I ask you one question?"

"...A question? Is that why you ran after me?"

"I have something to ask of you."

"Starting with Horikita, and even you. What is it?"

"Do you think that today's Japanese society is fair?"

"What a sudden change in topic. Do you get anything out of it even if I answer?"

"It's very important."

"If I speak my opinion, then no, it's not fair. Not one bit"

"Yes, I also think the same way. Fairness and equality is a lie."

"Did you chase after me to ask that question? If that's all, I'm leaving."

"One week ago, when you told us that the test material had changed, you said something like this: 'I forgot to tell the class.' Because of that, the notice reached us about a week after the other classes were informed about it."

"I said that in the staff room. So what?"

"Even though all the questions, our points, and the threat of expulsion is the same among all classes, only class D is treated unfairly."

"Are you saying you can't agree to that? But it's a good example. I guess you could call it a micro example of our unfair society today."

"Of course, no matter how positively you look at it, the world is an unfair place. However, we are humans that can think and act."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to say that it should seem equal at least."

"...I see."

"It doesn't matter whether or not 'forgetting' to tell us was on purpose. However, it's a fact that one person is now being forced to leave the school because of those unequal conditions."

“What do you want me to do?”

“That is why I came to you. I want to meet with the school, who is perpetuating this inequality.”

“To say you don’t agree?”

“I just want to confirm the school’s decisions with the right people.”

“Sadly, even though you aren’t wrong, I cannot let you. Sudou will drop out. It’ll be very difficult to overturn that ruling at this time. Give up.”

She ignored my argument. But that doesn’t mean there’s no meaning in her words As expected, this person is someone who always has a hidden implication in her words.

“Difficult to be overturned at this time. In other words, there is a way to change the outcome.”

“Ayanokouji, I personally have a high opinion of you. Certainly, getting the old test questions was a correct solution. Furthermore, coming up with that idea even goes beyond common sense. But you distributed the questions to the class and raised the average test score. I think there’s merit in coming up with that idea.”

“Kushida also helped in getting those questions, so I did nothing special.”

“I know that you didn’t openly admit it, but there are upperclassmen too. I also know that you got the test questions from a third year.”

Somehow, my actions were discovered.

“However, despite having a solid start by getting a hold of the test questions, you messed up at the end. That was why your plan didn’t work. If he memorized them more thoroughly, Sudou probably wouldn’t have gotten a failing grade in English. Why don’t you give up and let Sudou drop out? Won’t his future be more comfortable then?”

“To be honest... probably. However, I decided to help out this time. Or rather, I should say that I’m not giving up yet. I have one last attempt.”

From my pocket, I took out my student card.

“What do you mean?”

“Please sell me one point for Sudou’s English test.”

“...”

Looking at me in astonishment, she laughed loudly.

“Hahahahaha. That’s an interesting proposal. As I thought, you’re different. I never imagined you would try to buy points.”

“Sensei, you said so on the first day. There’s nothing that can’t be bought by points in this school. The midterm is one such thing in this school.”

“I see, I see. Certainly, you could think of that way. Do you even have the money to pay me, though?”

“Well then, how much is one point?”

“A very difficult question indeed. No one’s ever asked to buy a point before. Let’s see... I’ll give you a point for 100,000 points.”

“Sensei, you’re cruel.”

There isn’t a single person in the school who hasn’t used a point at all.

In other words, there isn’t anyone who has 100,000 points.

“—I will also pay.”

A voice came from behind me. Turning around, I saw Horikita standing there.

“Horikita...”

“Kuku. As I thought, you two are interesting.”

Chiyabashira-sensei took both our student cards.

“Alright, I’ll agree to sell you a point. I’ll take a total of 100,000 points from the two of you. Tell the rest of the class that Sudou’s expulsion has been canceled.”

“Is that fine?”

“You promised to pay 100,000 points, so it can’t be helped.”

Chiyabashira-sensei talked with an amused tone as she continued to look at

us in wonder.

“Horikita, you also understand, right? Ayanokouji’s skill.”

“...Well... I only see an unpleasant student.”

“What do you mean by unpleasant...”

“You purposely got low scores on tests, thought to get old test questions and give the credit to Kushida-san, and came up with the idea of buying test points. I don’t think you’re particularly special, you’re just unpleasant.”

Somehow, it looks like she heard about the test questions too.

“If it’s you guys, you might actually be able to move your class up.”

“I don’t know about him, but I will definitely rise up.”

“In the past, there’s never been a case where a class D has been promoted. It’s because the school immediately labels you as inferior and pushes you aside. How are you going to accomplish that?”

“Sensei.”

Without wavering, Horikita returned Chiyabashira-sensei’s gaze.

“Honestly, many of the students in class D are inferior. However, that doesn’t mean they’re trash.”

“What’s the difference between inferior goods and trash?”

“There’s a paper thin difference. I think that with a little help, there is the possibility of improving an inferior good to a superior quality.”

“I see. When you say it, it sounds oddly persuasive.”

I had to agree with her words as well. Her words were certainly significant..

Horikita, who previously looked at other students and people as a hindrance, was slowly changing.

Of course, it’s not that simple. Even though it’s a tiny glimpse of her change, it’s a huge change. As if she noticed as well, Chiyabashira-sensei faintly smiled.

“Well then, I look forward to it. As your homeroom teacher, I’ll make sure to watch attentively to future events.”

Chiyabashira-sensei walked away, towards the staff room.

We were left behind in the hallway.

"Shall we go back too? It'll be class soon."

"Ayanokouji-kun."

"Hmm? Ow!"

She struck my sides with her hand.

"Hey, the hell was that for!?"

"I just felt like it."

With that, she left me behind and walked away.

Good grief, what a bother... I looked at her as she walked away.

While thinking that, I decided to chase after her.

Epilogue: The victory celebration

“Cheers!”

Holding a can of juice, Ike shouted in excitement.

After the midterm results were announced, all the study group members gathered in the evening. Everyone, minus Horikita, was smiling because no one had to drop out.

With our friends, we all made it past the hardships. Is this what youth is?

I guess this isn’t bad.

“...What’s with that gloomy face? Sudou wasn’t kicked out, so everything’s over, right?”

“I don’t mind the celebration, but why is it in my room?”

“My room’s dirty, and so is Sudou’s and Yamauchi’s. We also can’t go to the girl’s rooms, right? No, of course, I’d love it if we were in Kushida-chan’s room. That’s why your wonderful and completely empty room is the best, Ayanokouji.”

“It’s only been two months since the start of school. It’s stranger to have so much stuff, rather.”

Other than my daily necessities, there’s nothing else I really need.

“What do you think, Kushida-chan?”

“I think it’s fine. It feels clean, fresh, and simple.”

“Right? It must be nice to be praised by Kushida-chan. Hahahaha.”

Ike, who looked like he had a personal grudge against me, pushed me lightly (but not really).

“All things considered, though, this midterm was pretty dangerous. If we didn’t do that study group, Ike and Sudou were definitely going to get kicked out.”

“Hah? You were pretty much on the edge too, you know?”

“No no, I would be able to get a perfect score if I tried. Seriously.”

“Everything’s thanks to Horikita-san’s effort. After all, she also taught Ike-kun, Sudou-kun, and Yamauchi-kun.”

Horikita stayed outside of the circle, and was reading her novel by herself. When we said her name, though, she raised her head as she put the bookmark back in the book.

“I’m just acting for myself. If someone dropped out, class D’s points would drop as well.”

“Even if it’s a lie, say that you did it for us. We’ll think of you better.”

“It’s fine if you don’t think better of me.”

Well, her attitude is the same as ever, but her participating in this group is an improvement in of itself.

If it was the old Horikita, she definitely wouldn’t have come.

“Well, but... Horikita’s surprisingly nice.”

Follow up on her remark, Sudou replied.

Ever since Horikita apologized, Sudou stopped being so hostile towards her. Before, he declared her to be no good, but it looks like people change.

“Anyway, why did Sensei decide to cancel Sudou’s expulsion?”

“I was also wondering about that. What sorcery did you use, Horikita-chan?”

“Eh, don’t remember.”

“Uwa, a secret!?”

Ike fell over exaggeratedly.

“Just because we made it past the midterm, we shouldn’t be celebrating wildly. Our next hurdle is the final exam. Obviously, the problems on the final exam will probably be harder than this exam. Also, we still have to look for a way to raise our points.”

“Do we have to start this hellish studying again... That’s the worst.”

Ike buried his head in his hands.

“Don’t you think we should start now so that it doesn’t become too bad?”

“No!”

Guess not.

“I don’t understand anything about the school, like the class division and the point system...”

“Ah~ my points~. I want points~. Poverty is really the worst~.”

Having used up all their points, Ike and Yamauchi were living only on free goods.

“Hey, Horikita-san. Is it still really hard to get points?”

“We did well on the test, so we should be able to get some points, right!?”

“Have you seen our average? Among all the classes, we’re by far the lowest. If you think we can get points like that, you should change your way of thinking.”

Like always, Horikita said the truth without mincing matters.

“Then we get no points next month as well... no...”

“Just live a life in moderation and give up on your luxurious lifestyle.”

“It’s ok, Ike-kun. We might not get any points right now, but we’ll get some points in the near future. Right? Horikita-san.”

“I wonder.”

“Can I say something? We’re all friends, after all. Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun, and I are working together to try and get to class A. If it’s fine, I want you guys to help us.”

“Get to... class A? Eh, are you serious?”

“Yea. Of course. Trying to increase our points, obviously, is an important part of that as well.”

“But isn’t that super far-fetched? They’re a smart bunch, right? Since they’re way smarter, isn’t it practically impossible?”



If you just think about their grades, a whole group of people like Horikita is scary.

“Studying isn’t the only thing that decides classes though. ...right?”

“Yea, but if you can’t study, it’s out of the question.”

The three people whistled and averted their eyes.

“We’re still pretty far from our goal, but if we work together, we’ll get there. Definitely.”

“Where’s the evidence for that?”

“Evidence... Well, three people working together won’t fail as easily as just one, right?”

“I don’t think that really applies to these three.”

“W-well... Oh, that’s it! Three heads are better than one! Something like that.”

“Well, if you add their test scores, it’s like one person’s score.”

Kushida tried to make the three sound useful, but Horikita completely dismantled her attempts. What an amazing pair.

“If we fight, nothing will get done, right? Getting along is definitely better.”

“...If you think about it, I guess that’s about right.”

“Right?”

Horikita didn’t try to deny her words.

In any case, if we’re trying to move up in classes, it’s probably best to get along with as many classmates as possible.

If we fight at this stage, nothing will come out of our efforts.

“That’s why I want to ask you three for help once again.”

“Gladly!”

Ike and Yamauchi immediately replied.

“Well, if Horikita asks me to help, then...”

Sudou tried to hide his embarrassment.

“I’ve never thought to rely on you, Sudou-kun, and I also never wanted you to

help. You wouldn't be very helpful in the first place."

"Guh... I was trying to be nice, you know!"

"Trying to be nice? I'm surprised."

Not surprisingly, Sudou flared up in anger, but didn't raise his fist. He's improving too, it seems.

"You're annoying."

"Thank you for your kind words."

"...You're not cute at all."

"You say that, but what do you really mean?"

Ike poked fun at him. Sudou sent a fierce glare towards Ike, and put him in a headlock.

"Ow! S-stop!"

"If you say anything unnecessary I'm going to strangle you."

"Y-you're already strangling me! I give up!"

Seeing something along the lines of "friendship between men", Horikita let out a deep sigh.

"This school is ruled by our ability. Only harsh competitions awaits us now. It's not something you can do half-heartedly. If you say you'll help and then give up, you'll only be a hindrance."

"Leave anything physical to me. I have confidence in my basketball and fighting skills."

"...I can't expect anything from you after all."

Ruled by our ability, huh. I feel my chest tightening.

Essentially, we've been estranged from the rest of the world. Before I noticed, I put a lot of effort in our joint work. Well, I guess you could also call it a curse of sorts.

Horikita has set her sights on class A. She's dead set on doing so.

However, the road out of class D will be a difficult one.

With how we're performing right now, it'll be hard to get to class C.

If that's the case, what should I do from now on?

I'll focus on doing my best for now.

At least... I want to see Horikita smile once.

Horikita Short Story 1: A certain morning in the swimming pool

Something that happened a certain morning. I heard a deep sigh.

“hah – swim...”

Almost all boys were ecstatic, but only Hondo was dispirited.

“What’s wrong?”

“Eh? No, nothing...”

Hondo looked as if he was worried about something.

“Speaking of which, You’ve always been looking. Don’t tell me, you can’t swim?”

It’s not like I’m an expert, I have an ordinary level. It’s only that, you see, there are a lot of things, if I swam.”

I didn’t understand anything about what Hondo wanted to say.

“I’m not enthusiastic about it. This swimming thing is really boring.”

Hondo had returned to his seat very early.

“What’s wrong with that guy?”

Ike tilted his head, not understanding him.

“Ah –so it’s that. So it’s that thing.”

Sudo seemed to have understood Hondo’s train of thought and broke into laughter.

“What’s up?”

“There were also students like Hondo in middle school. He must be worried about that, the size of his lower parts.”

“What?”

Sudo's answer was really unexpected.

"It can't be, right?"

"No, those who adopt that attitude are most likely because of that. If it was because of other reasons, his belly will be exposed or he has thick body hair. Does Hondo meet any of these two criteria?"

Indeed, Hondo has a very average body that you can find everywhere.

"Men determine the winner by the size of the lower part. Normally, that part tend to be very big in guys who are ordinarily unrestrained. This is like the thumbnail of yourself for the society. If the lower part of a healthy youngster is small, his evaluation will also suffer changes, isn't that so?"

"Pfhahahaha! That guy, so his lower parts are small!"

Ike seemed to have understood Hondo's train of thought and laughed heartily. Ah – what an annoying society.

"That guy must be lazing around, look closely"

Sudo said that with a smiling face full of confidently.

Then the swimming class started. Today, Ike and Yamauchi were also excited about the girls' swimsuits.

Sudo looked at the Hondo he though was lazing around, while smiling.

It's because of people like you that even competition swimsuits have been vetoed by the adults, and there is a trend of guys and girls wearing swimsuits with less and less exposure, isn't it?

"Hey, what's Sudo laughing about, is there something funny?"

Kushida, who had finished changing her clothes, showed a face incapable to understand and asked me. As always, I didn't know where I should place my line of sight.

"There's a trivial matter"

"What do you mean by trivial matter?"

Stop, being gazed so cutely is also disturbing. Girl's swimsuits are extraordinarily erotic, I will get excited, you know?

If I said those words, I reckon Kushida would never talk to me again.

“Let’s swim! There are a lot of guys resting.”

Being vague, I said that while watching those who were just looking around. Kushida also looked around with me with an expression that implied agreement, to the students that were on the second floor.

“Girls have a variety of circumstances, but guys also have a lot too. Don’t you they it? Swimming.”

There are guys who merely dislike it, and there are guys who are not good at it.”

“Although not being good at it, if they gave up at the beginning because of these circumstances, they would never be able to overcome it no matter how long.”

Speaking like a teacher, Horikita has come. Well, the appearance of the swimsuits is really too bright.

In order to not look as if I was excessively looking that, I moved away my gaze without leaving any trace.

“I actually think that we should let them be. The worth of swimming, how should I put it? There are no daily complications for those who don’t know how to swim. For those who live in the cities, the necessity of swimming is completely non-existent, isn’t it?”

“What if there’s an accident? If there’s an earthquake, there will also be a tsunami. In order to raise the survival rate by 1%, there’s nothing that can’t be better than having learned to swim beforehand.”

Naturally, it’s impossible to deny this survival question once you have come up with this 1% word.

“Ahaha, the relationship between you two continues to be as good as always.”

“Not in the slightest.”

Horikita neither affirm nor deny. She just hates talking to Kushida.

“Kushida-chan---! Let’s do our best together too!”

Ike came jumping when he realized the existence of Kushida.

His mouth said chatting, but in his mind he was thinking about branding the image of Kushida’s swimsuit into his retina”

Kushida laughed and started chatting with Ike, not realizing in the slightest his perverted thoughts.

“That’s right, what is he laughing about?”

“Eh?”

Horikita looked at Sudo, who was ridiculing Hondo.

“Ah ---No. there are various sorts and varieties. Men also have men’s worries.”

“I don’t quite understand”

“Let’s make an analogy. There are women that have complicated feelings about the size of their bust, right?”

She looked at me astonished as if she was saying “what are you talking about all of a sudden?”. Being looked like this felt like a torture.

“In other words, men also have similar worries. Please try to empathize in the future.”

If I were to put it in more concrete words, there’s no doubt that this is sexual harassment. It was hard to say whether I would be beaten by Horikita.

“...so it’s like that. So senseless “

“Your ability to grasp ideas is really good”

“After hearing your dirty words, although unwillingly, it was enough to imagine.”

“If I was requested to explain that, I will just merely say the facts. Don’t treat me like the bad guy.”

“Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Is Ike okay?

Kushida, who was talking to Ike, had already approached us when we realized

her. About Ike, he was crouching while pressing his belly.

“He looks like he has stomachache.”

Kushida looked worriedly at him in the distance.

Ike, being the target of the worry, was indeed pressing his stomach, but he didn't look like he was hurting.

In other words, that must be that he gazed too much at Kushida and now he was paying the price.

That guy will never learn, he was always living following his instincts.

Horikita looked at Ike with an unforgiving gaze full of contempt.

Ah –youth.

I thought this even though I did not do anything

Horikita Short Story 2: Happy. Unhappy?

That was something that happened in a certain ordinary day. That happened not long after I enrolled in this school and it could not be said that I was accustomed to the school life yet.

I'm always tense when I get suddenly talked by a classmate, and I'm unable to chat normally.

In short, for me who belongs to the bottom of the class students, it's already exhausting to be able to put a name to a face.

People with high communication skills like Hirata and Kushida have already started to talk to people from the other classes.

"What an annoying reality..."

We both entered this school under the same circumstances, and yet right now we are different as night and day.

Even though I understood everybody have different skills, but at the moment I am regretting it.

In this atmosphere, the resident of my neighboring table spends every day not paying attention to it.

She never arrives late nor has had any absence, has outstanding grades, listens earnestly during classes. She is even fast at entering and leaving the classroom.

However, nobody interacts with her. To put it plainly, she has no friends.

"You look very relaxed, it looks like not having worries is truly great."

"What are you saying all of a sudden?"

Horikita, who was preparing for the next class, looked at me annoyed.

"Nothing. I can't help but think about these things."

"I follow my standards in order to take my studies seriously, you know?"

“I was not saying those things...well, you didn’t hear anything. I was wrong.”

“Even though you admitting being wrong is a good thing, I feel that I can’t accept it.”

Horikita believes that she doesn’t need friends from the bottom of her heart.

Even if I argued with her, I wouldn’t have high odds of success, and there wouldn’t be any gain.

“Well, let’s study hard today too.”

“I’ve never seen you studying hard once though.”

I sighed after hearing her sarcastic remarks.

1

Next day. I woke up earlier than usual and I arrived 10 minutes before the class meeting began. There weren’t many students and the classroom was basically empty.

“I’ve arrived earlier than Horikita.”

After all, since it was this time, I thought she had already arrived to the classroom, but it looks like even the first-rate person is going to arrive late.

“Good morning everyone.”

A moment later, Kushida, the class atmosphere mediator, entered the classroom.

The gloomy (I’m exaggerating) classroom suddenly became bright and cheerful.

Even if I only see Kushida in the morning, I still think she is very cute. I would probably feel the same if I saw her in the evening.

I didn’t know what was Kushida thinking. When she turned into my direction, our eyes accidentally met.

Normally, I was supposed to greet her by waving my hand, but I

subconsciously averted my eyes, typical from a good-for-nothing like me.

Today I was also running continuously at the bottom.

While I was staring blankly at the outside of the window, the class bells rang and the class meeting had started. Even at this time, I still hadn't seen Horikita.

I didn't know if Chabashira-sensei had realized or not that Horikita was not here. She didn't touch on this topic, finished the roll call and left the classroom.

"Is she late? So rare..."

I could only guess...

"Good morning Ayanokouji-kun!"

"Waah!?"

While I was staring blankly at Horikita's seat, Kushida stealthily appeared in my field of vision.

"Sorry, did I scare you?"

"...A little. Do you need something?"

"Yes. Actually, I'm concerned about something. Can I bother you a little bit?"

Don't say a little, you can take my time as you wish."

"Horikita-san hasn't come... to school, right?"

She looked at the seat beside me.

"It looks like it."

"Not even her bag could be seen there, she didn't come without a doubt."

"What do you want to say by asking this?"

She had some clue so she slowly nodded.

"You see, I saw Horikita-san leaving her room this morning."

"Eh?"

In other words, she certainly came to school this morning?

"It wasn't because she was undisposed that she didn't come?"

"It doesn't look like it... thus I was a bit worried. Normally I would be the one to talk to Horikita-san, but I'm hated by her."

"She doesn't hate you, she simply hates human relationships."

I feel like she doesn't particularly hate Kushida. Probably.

If it's okay with you, can I ask you to contact with her?"

So, it's like this, that's why you talked to me.

"Even if you want me to contact her... I don't know Horikita's phone number."

"Eh, it's like that?"

"Yes, I'm very sorry. I guess the rest of people are in the same situation."

"What... what do we do then?"

"Isn't it okay by just leaving her alone?"

"but—"

Kushida is really a gentle person, she's even excessively worried about Horikita.

"I'll go look at her circumstances."

"You say circumstances... isn't the next class starting soon?"

"But doesn't this make people worried? Do you think Horikita would cut classes?"

"This is something... hard to imagine."

She gives the feeling of someone who would even come to class despite catching a cold.

"Although there's not much time left before the first lesson starts, if I run fast I should be able to get back on time."

Kushida, just like Horikita, is a model student that never arrives late nor is absent.

Even if she does this because she's worried about Horikita, it'll still leave a lateness record.

"Ah, wait a moment."

I lifted my heavy waist and slowly stood up.

I can't let Kusada be late, so I can only take a step forward. I'm definitely not pretending to be cool. Really.

"Ayanokouji-kun?"

"In short, I'll go look for Horikita's situation."

"Eh?"

"I can't let Kushida cut classes. And if I run, I am more likely to get back in time for the class. So I'll be right back."

"But, But, this is something I wanted to do on my own accord. I can't request you to do it."

"No problem, Since the lecture go in one ear and out the other anyways."

...Probably.

"I'm sorry... thank you"

"It's nothing. By the way, which is Horikita's room number?

If I had run panically right now, I would end up not knowing where her room is.

I need to ask this.

"Let me think, it's 1201."

Since I've been thanked by Kushida, then this might be something that will score points.

In her heart, my points have probably risen up.

There's approximately 8 minutes until the first class starts.

Running to the dorms needs 2 to 3 minutes, so there's a chance to get back on time.

I immediately left the classroom and run like the wind through the corridor. It looks like it might be a bit motivated.

Feeling slightly embarrassed, I ran through the empty courtyard and I arrived at the dorms entrance. Thanks to the students who were going to class, the 2 elevators were stopped in the first floor. I immediately entered the elevator to go to the 12th floor.

Since I couldn't help but feel anxious, I kept pressing the target floor's button.
“The upper floors are the girl’s area...”

I arrived at the corridor of the 12th floor in an instant and looked for room number 1201. Just by thinking this was the place where the girls live, my heart started beating faster. Dangerous, this is not the moment to think about these things. If it's like what Kushida saw, then Horikita should be inside her room.

After arriving at the front of the room, I first caught my breath. Then I pushed the doorbell.

“...”

However, after waiting for a while, I did not hear a response from the room. Have you already left for the school?

No, there is only one path to school. If that was the case, we would've surely run into each other. And she didn't take the other elevator.

She's either not in her room, or perhaps she has collapsed inside.

In order to confirm the situation, I gripped the entrance doorknob.

“Should I knock the door again?”

Even though she's Horikita, she's undoubtedly a girl.

So I pushed the doorbell, then I knocked the door, and waited for a response from inside.

This time I waited a bit longer. But it was the same in the end. No reaction.
“Damn, there's no other way.”

Having made a firm resolution about entering the door, I turned the doorknob.

Then the doorknob easily turned around, thus opening the door. Which meant the probability of Horikita being inside was very high.

“Hey Horikita, are you here?”

Since it's one room, by looking inside was enough to find out the situation.

Then--

“Eh...”

Horikita was inside.

She didn't collapse, nor was in pain.

She was in the process of changing her clothes.

She didn't suddenly scream because of the unexpected visitor, but calmly looked at me with a sharp glance.

“...What are you doing?”

She didn't feel ashamed, Horikita stopped her movements and asked me.

This could be considered one of Horikita's ways of being wavered.

Is it because her brain has not recognized that she has been seen naked, that she's not trying to hide?

I was slightly worried about how to respond to her question, being bewildered about where should I look at, while I stared at her soft and glossy skin. After all, I had no choice, right? A girl's naked body is hard to see.

Even if what I'm seeing is similar to what I saw during swimming classes, it's still totally different.

“This, In fact I was requested by Kushida. She wanted to have me look for Horikita's situation. You see, haven't you been persisting on not being late nor absent? Usually you go to school very early. Kushida said that she saw you this morning leaving the room, and yet you didn't arrive at the classroom, she wondered if you had a reason and wanted to come here to look for you. But since a girl coming here would take a lot of time, as a result, I stepped forward

and arrived at here.

Not even I would believe that I was reciting my lines so well in order to justify myself.

Even if this was the truth, it wouldn't be acceptable to be linked to being seen while changing clothes.

"Only this?"

"...Only this."

This looks exactly like the final words of a death row prisoner.

I calmly prepared myself for the punishment I was going to happen next.

"I see..."

It looks like she has sort out the things inside her heart. She put on her skirt, buttoned her blouse and became the she that usually wears the school uniform.

"In other words, you came here to see my circumstances because you were worried?"

"That's right. Because it's unnatural that the superior Horikita would be late."

"It can't be helped. Something came up."

Horikita said this while finishing changing her clothes, and picked up her uniform that was on her bed.

"I was planning to go to school wearing these clothes, but some trouble happened."

"Trouble?"

Horikita unfolded her uniform and showed me the right side of the abdomen.

There were a few centimeters of scratch marks. Leaving a hole.

"You know that there's a bookshelf in the entrance? There were protruding nails that hooked my uniform. This is such an embarrassing topic."

That's why there was such a big cut. Sure enough, it was difficult to go to school in this situation.

So she hastily returned to her room and wore her spare uniform.

“Anyway, it’s a good thing that you’re okay. The time’s almost up.”

The time on the phone showed that it was not long before the first class started.

If we ran right now we should be barely in time.

I want to escape from Horikita’s side... In order to not arrive late, I turned my body.

“Ayanokouji-kun.”

I flusteredly wanted to leave the room , but I was mercilessly called.

“M-may I ask what’s the matter?”

“Can you look at me?”

“D-do I must look at you?”

“Even though I can choose to not look at me, but it will make you regret it even more, you know?”

“May I ask what do you need?”

Horrified, I turned around, but I was attacked by the approaching Horikita.

Followed by a knife hand that stabbed on my abdomen.

All the food I ate in the morning came out fiercely.

After I fell down on the spot, she stabbed on my neck with her knife hand.

“Wagu!”

I was knocked on the floor in this way.

“Whatever reason you had, have you prepared yourself to accept the punishment?”

“I-I’ve never thought things would become like this...!”

Even though I’ve prepared myself to accept the punishment, but her power is really frightening.

I can’t believe this strike was done with that lavish body.

“The fact that I didn’t call the police can be considered mercy. However, I

wonder why I haven't cooled my temper merely with this."

"I've suffered fairly painful experience. If it's possible, I wish you could stop here..."

I requested horikita in order to not suffer any more attacks.

"...Ah..."

I shouldn't have lifted my head during the moment I was laying on the floor.

It wasn't my intention but I slightly glanced at the white colored existence under the skirt.

Together with what I saw earlier, it was another seducing feeling.

Why did I look when I knew perfectly well that I shouldn't look?

"Wait, this is--"

The back of my head suffered an acute pain. Immediately after that, I lost my consciousness a couple of seconds.

"What if I had died there!"

"No problem. I've been aiming my attacks so that doesn't happen."

She said something that I didn't know if they were apprehensive words.

"I'm really miserable..."

"Can you hurry up and leave my room? I'm troubled because I can't lock the door"

"I wish you could be a little bit more considerate with me..."

"Let me think... If you want to collapse, I ask you to go to the corridor."

"This is absolutely not being considerate!"

I crawled to the corridor as if I was kicked out.

"See you then."

Even though this should be obvious, Horikita ignored me, who couldn't exert force to my legs, not being able to run.

I don't need to mention that I was late in the end.

Deep in my heart I sorrowfully determined that I would at least brand the image of Horikita wearing her underwear in my brain.

Horikita Short Story 3

"Hey, do you sometimes feel that you are indifferent to no matter what the world becomes?"

"Why are you suddenly asking this? Too bad, I've never been pessimistic about my own life."

"I'm not saying about being pessimistic about one's life... it looks like this has nothing to do with Horikita."

Horikita blatantly adopted a disgusted, or probably an annoyed look, and sighed deeply.

"So, what are you trying to say?"

"I was thinking, what's the meaning of people trying so hard in a meritocracy world?"

"Of course that's for oneself, are you stupid?"

"Going as far as to call me stupid... so specifically, what's this "for oneself" referring to?"

"Isn't this precisely promoting one's inner qualities, and going for jobs that possess a high status in the society?"

Horikita answered this as if it were natural. Of course, it's not like I can't understand her.

The main reason about studying high school, university, or graduate school is to find a better job in the future.

Of course, the dreams one hasn't stopped pursuing since childhood are also included among these. However, those are a small minority, and perhaps there are also ambitious goals that can't be achieved by just trying hard.

"Then Horikita, what do you want to be in the future?"

"I haven't decided it yet, because I am hiding an infinite variety of

possibilities.”

I don’t think there are anyone who can flatter themselves as impressively as her.

Not letting anyone think that was just a speech to conceal the fact she hasn’t considered it yet, perhaps it could also be considered one of her strong points.

“What do you want to do in the future... I’m certain that you have not thought about it.”

“Don’t assert for me. Maybe I unexpectedly have a specific goal?”

“...You’re right. Although the odds are quite low, I’ll ask you for the time being. What do you plan to do in the future? Do you have a planning?”

“I want to become the Prime Minister.”

“... I was stupid for asking you.”

Horikita made a pose as if she was supporting her forehead, and turned her body around.

“Hey, listen to me. I was joking about becoming the Prime Minister. What I want to become is that, something like a civil servant.”

“For someone who wants to avoid troublesome things like you, this is a stable path... but can you become one?”

With this statement, she was clearly lamenting about my lack of ability.

“This civil servant thing, it’s something that you can accidentally become one if you want to become one.”

“Someone who thinks like this will certainly not be able to become one. I advise you to be a convenience store clerk the rest of your life.”

“You are being rude towards all the shop clerks who work at the convenience stores around the country.”

“Of course, I will respect those workers who have conviction. It’s simply that I think you are self-degenerating yourself. You’ll probably become a lazy salesclerk. I believe this is beyond redemption.”

“Suddenly I feel like I want to cry.”

"If you really have a goal you want to pursue, then you need to take advantage of the time when you are still a student to fully stride forward. Because even if you regret it later, you can't reverse time. Finally, what will appear in front of your eyes will be the unchangeable reality."

"...I will remember that."

Even though we are clearly at the same age, I can't help but to think that I'm being admonished by a teacher.